SETTING THE RECORD STRAIGHT:  
WOMEN LITERARY JOURNALISTS WRITING AGAINST THE MAINSTREAM

A dissertation presented by

Jonathan D. Fitzgerald

to

The Department of English

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

In the field of
English

Northeastern University
Boston, MA
June 2018
SETTING THE RECORD STRAIGHT:
WOMEN LITERARY JOURNALISTS WRITING AGAINST THE MAINSTREAM

A dissertation presented by

Jonathan D. Fitzgerald

ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English
in the College of Social Sciences and Humanities of
Northeastern University
June 2018
ABSTRACT

Women, when their stories are told in the mainstream press, are often constrained to preconceived notions of gender roles, described as “fallen,” sensationalized as cold-blooded killers or hapless victims, flattened into archetypes to conform to cultural master narratives, or stereotyped as microcosmic representations of a larger demographic. But the mainstream press is not the last word. In the mid- to late-nineteenth century, as the media in America began to codify around the ideal of objectivity in reporting that we are familiar with today, a new genre was born, a hybrid of the older sentimental story model and the new “fact-based” reporting. By combining the subjectivity of the story model with the factual rigor of the ideal of objectivity, literary journalism is well suited to tell the stories behind the headlines and to offer correctives to often over-simplified narratives. There at the beginning of the literary journalism’s genesis and continuing through today, women literary journalists have proven particularly adept at offering a much needed corrective to, first, sensational reporting, and then to so-called objective journalism. Some of the best and most persuasive examples of literary journalism over the course of its nearly 200-year history were written by Catherine Williams, Margaret Fuller, Nellie Bly, Zora Neale Hurston, and Joan Didion, among others, who work against reductive, objectified representations of women to set the record straight, to tell the stories of actual women whose full
character comes alive on the page. While a few of these women have, by some scholars, been recognized as writers of literary journalism, their work is widely underrepresented in contemporary discussions of the genre. And, while their styles differ, and in some cases, challenge the notion of what has come to constitute literary journalism, they are unified in their effort to narrow the gap between the subjectivities of author, reader, and subject. This dissertation is an effort both to recover the writing of the earliest women literary journalists, and to show the ways in which the styles they employed and concerns that preoccupied them—namely working against the objectification and caricaturing of women—continue to animate the work of women writers who followed into the twentieth century and through to today.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

When I was younger, dreaming of someday becoming a writer, I thought of writing as a solitary endeavor. I know better now; it is, decidedly, not. This work, in particular, is the product of the combined efforts and inspiration of so many—family, friends, teachers, scholars, authors living and dead—and finally, at the end, me toiling at my keyboard in an effort to channel all of these efforts and influences.

I am particularly indebted to my committee, three brilliant scholars with a diverse set of interests that somehow collectively address nearly all of my own scholarly preoccupations. I have no doubt that I would not be a PhD candidate if it were not for Ryan Cordell. From our very first conversation before I had even applied to Northeastern, and nearly every day since, he has been a constant source of encouragement as well as a challenge to my preconceived notions of myself as a scholar. He has shaped this work in ways that I think are obvious and I hope it does justice to his profound insight and influence. Carla Kaplan is responsible for planting the seed that grew into this project with one simple sentence, “where are all the women?” This observation, made by Carla as I was putting together a reading list for a directed study on the history of literary journalism that she supervised, set me on a path that I know I couldn’t have taken without her guidance. Carla stretched and challenged me almost as much as she...
encouraged me. Finally, I’m so grateful for Hillary Chute for agreeing to meet with me and ultimately to join my committee even before she had formally joined the faculty at Northeastern. From that very first meeting, she has provided sharp insight and blunt truth when I most needed it. I also want to thank Ben Schmidt, who was on my comprehensive exam committee and thus directly contributed to the early stages of this project—including his insight that I not limit it to one historical era but consider the breadth of the genre of literary journalism.

In addition to these four there have been many others in the English Department at Northeastern who have contributed in ways large and small to this project and I’m so grateful for each of them—from professors, to friends and colleagues, to the administrative staff—thank you. I would not have been able to complete this project in so timely a manner had it not been for the generous support of the Northeastern University Humanities Center Residential Fellowship program. I’m grateful for that support, as well as for the intellectual community provided by Lori Lefkovitz and the other fellows.

My parents have prioritized my education for as long as I can remember. They have made tremendous sacrifices so that my sister and I could go to good schools, and they continued to support my education even when they weren’t sure why I kept going back for more. Beyond this support, however, they’ve always let me know how proud they are of me, and sustaining that pride has been a significant motivator in just about everything I do. I’m beyond grateful for them, as well as for my sister and brother-in-law, Jen and Phil and their beautiful kids. I’m so thankful for the love and support of my in-laws, Susie and Joel Skinner. I want to acknowledge, too, my grandparents and extended family, who encouraged me and supported my education.
throughout my life. And then there are the friends who may as well be family; I’ve been blessed with a few, and I’m particularly grateful to Jay and Dave.

Finally, this dissertation is dedicated to my wife Stephanie and our beautiful children Penelope Evelyn and John Wesley. I am here at the end of my doctoral work not just because Steph believed in me, but much more than that: she knew that I would be here. There was never a doubt in her mind, even a decade ago, that I would earn a PhD and her assuredness of this fact made it seem inevitable. I accomplished this because of her, and I accomplished it for her and for Nell and Wes. It hasn’t been easy, but after all the work and all the sacrifices that each of us has made, I just wanted to make you proud of me.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract .................................................................................................................................................. 2
Acknowledgements................................................................................................................................... 5
Table of Contents .................................................................................................................................... 8
Introduction ........................................................................................................................................... 9

*The Sentimental Ethos and Political Voices of Women Literary Journalists*

Chapter 1 ............................................................................................................................................... 39

*Margaret Fuller and Nellie Bly Writing Against the Separate Spheres*

Chapter 2 ............................................................................................................................................... 74

*Catherine Williams and Winifred Black Writing Against Sensational Reporting*

Chapter 3 ............................................................................................................................................... 109

*Zora Neale Hurston and Joan Didion Writing Against Racialized Master Narratives*

Coda ....................................................................................................................................................... 137

*The Rapid Media Change Theory of the History of American Literary Journalism*

Works Cited .......................................................................................................................................... 169
INTRODUCTION: THE SENTIMENTAL ETHOS AND POLITICAL VOICES OF WOMEN LITERARY JOURNALISTS

In 1834, a young woman, a mill worker, was found hanging from a tree in Fall River, Massachusetts. At first it appeared to be suicide, but after further investigation it was clear she was murdered. The prime suspect was a Methodist minister with whom the young woman had had an affair. The minister was tried and, astonishingly, found innocent; the woman was described in the press as a wanderer and religious fanatic and possibly insane. She was, in short, the kind of woman who, had she lived, might have been confined to one of the many asylums for women that came into existence in the middle of the nineteenth century. In these places, women could be institutionalized for anything from frequent headaches to promiscuity to actual insanity. They were the “fallen women,” and as the national press codified around the tabloid model in the late nineteenth century, fallen women were the frequent subjects of sensational stories. When in the first decade of the twentieth century, one such fallen woman who stood by her husband while
he was tried for murdering her former lover became an object of sympathy, the mainstream media, in the midst of a shift from sensational storytelling to “objective” reporting, transformed the narrative of the fallen woman to that of woman as pitiable victim. Sympathy could be extended to victimized women, but in the master narratives of media coverage, they must look and act a certain way. They must be white. Even four decades later, in the 1950s, there was no sympathy for a well-to-do African American woman from Florida who killed her white lover after he repeatedly abused, drugged, and raped her. But a white woman, pretty and young and successful in the New York City of the late 1980s, could rise beyond sympathy to become a symbol of purity and endurance after she is beaten and raped in Central Park by a “wolfpack” of African American and Hispanic teenage boys. The mainstream press in the United States, whether characterized by sensationalism or dispassionate “objectivity” tends to rely on caricatures and master narratives—templates—to synthesize the news of the day into salient and sellable bits. And in this reduction, the fullness of female characters is often the first thing to go.

Indeed, women, when their stories are told in the mainstream press, are often constrained to preconceived notions of gender roles, described as “fallen,” sensationalized as cold-blooded killers or hapless victims, flattened into archetypes to conform to cultural master narratives, or stereotyped as microcosmic representations of a larger demographic. But the mainstream press is not the last word. In the mid- to late-nineteenth century, as the media in America began to codify around the ideal of objectivity in reporting that we are familiar with today, a new genre was born, a hybrid of the older sentimental story model and the new “fact-based” reporting. By combining the subjectivity of the story model with the factual rigor of the ideal of objectivity,
literary journalism is well suited to tell the stories behind the headlines and to offer correctives to often over-simplified narratives. There at the beginning of the genre’s genesis, and continuing through today, women literary journalists have proven particularly effective at offering a much needed to corrective to first, sensational reporting, and then, objective journalism. Some of the best and most persuasive examples of literary journalism over the course of its nearly 200-year history were written by Catherine Williams, Margaret Fuller, Nellie Bly, Zora Neale Hurston, and Joan Didion, among others, who work against reductive, objectified representations of women to tell the stories of actual women whose full character comes alive on the page. While a few of these women have, by some scholars, been recognized as writers of literary journalism, their work is greatly underrepresented in contemporary discussions of the genre. And, while their styles differ, and in some cases, challenge the notion of what has come to constitute literary journalism, they are unified in their effort to narrow the gap between the subjectivities of author, reader, and subject. This dissertation is an effort both to recover the writing of the earliest women literary journalists, and to show the ways in which the styles they employed and concerns that preoccupied them—namely working against the objectification and caricaturing of women—continue to animate the work of those that followed into the twentieth century and through to today.

Before we get to the specific contributions of women literary journalists, however, it is important to define the often amorphous term, to understand the history of the genre, and to see how the accepted history has worked to quiet the voices of women writers.
Defining Literary Journalism

Literary journalism is a contentious term, the mere uttering of which invites conflict from all sides. For example, in 2012, the critic D.G. Myers and Norman Sims debated the term in a back-and-forth that spanned several websites and blog posts. Myers writes “the classification ‘literary journalism’ is dull and vapid,” condescendingly referring to it as “journalism with literary pretensions” (Myers). Sims agrees with Myers that the term has “some inherent difficulties” but notes that the decision to use the term to describe the genre, as well as the standards by which classification as literary journalism would be achieved, was the subject of vigorous debate at the first IALJS conference and came out the winner over other possible choices (Sims, *NBCC Reads: Norman Sims on Literary Journalism - Critical Mass Blog*). Indeed the name itself can be perceived—and has been described as—an oxymoron if viewed through a lens that fails to see the historical relationship between literature and journalism. Much has been done to separate the disciplines in the twentieth century with the result that this historical relationship, which dates back into the nineteenth century, has been all but lost to us.

One consequence of the ongoing debate about the genre’s name, John C. Hartsock writes in an essay titled “The Critical Marginalization of American Literary Journalism,” is that critics and scholars from the fields of English and journalism both “construct critical paradigms that would prove exclusionary, whether intentionally or not, of literary journalism” (J. C. Hartsock, “The Critical Marginalization of American Literary Journalism.” 61). This dual marginalization has rendered literary journalism academically homeless, a particularly ironic circumstance
considering its long history and its increasing popularity. Undoubtedly, the ambiguousness of the term “literary journalism” plays an important role in its continued critical marginalization.

If attempts to settle on a name have proved challenging, so too have various scholars’ efforts to define the genre and to identify, with any kind of broad agreement, works of literary journalism. Thomas B. Connery argues for the term literary journalism not only because of the historical precedence of its use over time, but also because “the two words, literary journalism, simply seem to best identify the printed prose under consideration” (Connery, *A Sourcebook of American Literary Journalism* 15). It is journalism, he notes, because practitioners employ traditional journalistic means of reporting to gather information, and often the subjects considered have a kind of journalistic immediacy. He notes that the use of the word “literary” is more problematic and asserts that it is not meant to suggest that other kinds of journalism cannot be literary, rather, “[literary] is used because it says that while the work considered is journalistic…[the work’s] purpose is not just informational” (Connery, *A Sourcebook of American Literary Journalism* 15). Ultimately, what is at stake is the question of timeliness versus timelessness; the journalistic aspect of the genre promises timeliness, whereas the literary nature “makes the work less ephemeral and allows it to become writing that is more likely than conventional mainstream journalism to stand up over time,” as Connery writes (Connery, *A Sourcebook of American Literary Journalism* 15). The question of timeliness versus timelessness is one that has plagued the genre since its inception in the nineteenth century and it is, in part, responsible for the cleavage between literature and journalism.
While Connery’s selection of the term literary journalism and his justifications and definitions are convincing, critics who have followed him still often find it necessary to define literary journalism and justify their usage of the term. Below, I survey three such writers who approach literary journalism from the perspective of a journalism scholar, literature professors, and a practitioner of the genre. It is clear that there are overlapping concerns that come to define the genre across disciplines as well as those disparate areas that form the focus of each perspective. Ultimately, no single definition exists and this remains one of the chief reasons for the genre’s homelessness in the academy.

Norman Sims defines the genre by way of a list of “shared characteristics.” In the introduction to *True Stories*, after a few pages of handwringing over what to call the genre, he writes, “the nature of literary journalism has evolved during the past several decades, and, at best, definitions have always been a bit vague…A list of characteristics can be an easier way to define literary journalism than a formal definition or a set of rules” (Sims, *True Stories* 6–7). Among the characteristics he settles on are “immersion reporting, complicated structures in the prose, accuracy, voice, responsibility, and attention to the symbolic realities of a story” (Sims, *True Stories* 12). These characteristics, he notes, are the result of interviewing several practitioners in 1984, and he adds that 23 years later he would append “access, attention to ordinary lives, and the social qualities of a writer’s connection to the subjects” (Sims, *True Stories* 12). Ultimately, however, Sims seem to undercut his own efforts, and those of others who endeavor to pin down a definition of literary journalism, by suggesting that all such efforts are mere “abstractions” (Sims, *True Stories* 24).
As noted, Sims writes from the perspective of a journalism professor, so it is perhaps understandable that his way of defining literary journalism is by listing characteristics of the genre. Kevin Kerrane and Ben Yagoda, editors of *The Art of Fact: A Historical Anthology of Literary Journalism*, are English professors, however, and their definitions differ accordingly. Sims is interested in literary journalism as a writing style, whereas Kerrane and Yagoda approach the genre as readers. Yagoda writes in his preface to the anthology that key to the process of making selections for inclusion was defining literary journalism, “a profoundly fuzzy term” (Kerrane and Yagoda 13). He notes that for some it can mean “nothing more specific than laudable nonfiction,” before making an effort to unpack it, beginning with the word “journalism.” In order for something to qualify for the anthology, then, it needed to be factual. Additionally, keeping with the journalistic nature of the form, it must have come from some “active fact-gathering” or reporting. This criterion, Yagoda writes, made it possible to disqualify other forms of non-fiction including memoir, essay, and travel writing, among others. While this exclusion proved practical for the creation of their anthology, it should be noted that these forms are often considered by other scholars to be sub-genres of literary journalism. Finally, he adds currency to his list, or the time between when the reported-on event happened and when the writer wrote about it. This requirement is set in an effort to delineate between literary journalism and historical writing. The requirements for what makes a piece literary are far less grounded. Innovation, according to Yagoda, is what is most called for. Kevin Kerrane, in his preface, offers a perhaps more poetic, if not more concrete definition, when he quotes Yagoda as describing
literary journalism as “making facts dance” (Kerrane and Yagoda 20). Here, again, Sims’ sense that abstractions function where concrete definitions tend to fail rings true.

Jeff Sharlet is Associate Professor of English at Dartmouth College and a journalist who writes about religion in America. In 2014, he edited an anthology of literary journalism about religion titled *Radiant Truths: Essential Dispatches, Reports, Confessions, & Other Essays on American Belief*. In his introduction he calls literary journalism a “mashup” (Sharlet, *Radiant Truths* 5). Sharlet highlights the inherent tension in the term by way of definition; he writes, “literary journalism is not the product of a technique but the documentation of a tension between fact and art, what is and our expression of it” (Sharlet, *Radiant Truths* 12). He calls literary journalism “a compromise” and a “mutant genre” (Sharlet, *Radiant Truths* 14). Riffing on Walt Whitman’s notion of the piety of literature, he describes literary journalism as “Piety…married to the deliberate impiety of journalism” (Sharlet, *Radiant Truths* 14). In this way, Sharlet’s definition works in much the same way as the others we’ve seen, in abstractions and by way of comparison to what it is not.

So here are several definitions that, if they don’t get us any closer to being able to identify exactly what literary journalism is, at least elucidate the awkward position of the genre in relation to critical discourse. Is literary journalism a set of characteristics practiced by writers, a criterion for distinguishing it from some other things, an abstraction, or an embodied tension that ultimately eludes definition? Probably literary journalism is all of these, and more. John C. Hartsock, to add one additional layer of complexity, defines literary journalism against so-called “objective,” mainstream journalism by focusing on the expected outcome of a work of literary
journalism; for Hartsock the aim of literary journalism is to “narrow the distance between the alienated subjectivity and the indeterminate object in a narrative strategy opposite that of objectified versions of journalism” (J. Hartsock, A History 42). More than any list of characteristics or comparisons to other genres, this reader-response based definition strikes me as most convincing because it marks the genre across its formal variations over time and begins to clear the way forward for a theorization of literary journalism that is most aptly suited to the genre’s own internal characteristics. It also speaks directly to the work of the women literary journalists I discuss in this dissertation who write to add depth to their subjects—also often women—who the mainstream media flattens into archetypes or caricatures.

The History of Literary Journalism

The history of literary journalism is often understood in terms of waves or periods beginning in the mid- to late-19th century and continuing through the present day. This periodization of the history of literary journalism stems from the work of Thomas Connery, who divides the history of literary journalism into three periods—the late 19th century, the 1930s/40s, and the 1960s/70s—though he writes “despite the delineation of three periods when literary journalism seemed more abundant and more important, the line from the nineteenth through the twentieth century is continuous” (Connery, A Sourcebook of American Literary Journalism xiii). Others have followed Connery’s paradigm, albeit with some differences as to how they delineate the various periods.
Norman Sims likens the history of literary journalism to “that of Moses and his wanderings in the desert…an up and down journey punctuated with startling innovation” (Sims, True Stories 20). Elsewhere he calls it an “evolution” and breaks up the history of literary journalism into a number of periods, following Connelly. The first period includes the late 19th century and is marked almost immediately by conflict between journalism that is primarily literary and the emerging emphasis on the ideal of objectivity in journalism. This conflict so marks the history of literary journalism that it arises in every discussion of the genre, and is among the first sites of the genre’s critical marginalization. The second period spans the 40s and 50s when, except for what Sims calls the “oasis” of The New Yorker magazine, literary journalism was mostly dormant. What follows is arguably the most famous period in the history of the genre, the New Journalism. The final period begins at the dramatic fall of the New Journalism. In the late-60s and early-70s, a number of high profile literary journalists, including Truman Capote, were called into question for dubious reporting and unsubstantiated truth claims in their work. These scandals soured many on the genre. But, since the mid-70s, a number of writers have picked up the mantle (and the pieces) and carried it into yet another period of literary journalism, what Robert S. Boynton has termed the “New New Journalism.”

John Hartsock is more intentional than Sims in his effort to create a critical historicization of literary journalism because, he writes, “historicizing provides one important context for examining any material critically, one from which other critical examinations can depart” (J. Hartsock, A History of American Literary Journalism 2). For Hartsock, the prehistory of literary journalism can be traced back to “three approximate historical time frames”: “the classical period
in the Western tradition,” “the introduction of the printing press,” and the evolution of distinct “narrative” and “discursive” modes of journalism in the 19th century (J. Hartsock, *A History of American Literary Journalism* 81). From there, Hartsock sees the genre’s emergence resulting from three contemporaneous historical phenomena, namely, “the widespread ‘adoption’ of techniques commonly associated with realistic fiction,” the fact that “the form was practiced primarily by professional journalists or those…whose industrial means of production and expression were for the most part the newspaper and magazine press,” and “a new and vigorous critical awareness that the form as practiced could be ‘literary’” (J. Hartsock, *A History of American Literary Journalism* 23). In each phase, but especially in its emergence, literary journalism must contend with the rising tide of objectivity as the gold standard of news reporting. Hartsock writes that the emergence of literary journalism “was taking place against some of the main intellectual currents of the period that include the attempt to graft scientific method to journalistic practice, the emergence of literary realism and naturalism, and ultimately the pervasive influence of positivism” (J. Hartsock, *A History of American Literary Journalism* 43). These currents set the criteria for future literary journalism, while simultaneously contributing to its critical marginalization. While standards for journalism and literary studies developed late in the nineteenth century and into the twentieth, literary journalism codified as a hybrid—Thomas Connery calls it “a third way to tell a story”—combining elements from both literature and journalism, which would ultimately serve to distance it from both. Though the New Journalism of the 1960s and 70s briefly earned the admiration of scholars, Hartsock writes, “the form’s history has still managed…to remain largely unnoticed by most of the academy” (J.
Hartsock, *A History of American Literary Journalism* 202). As the twentieth century came to a close and the twenty-first century dawned, however, there were indications that literary journalism may finally becoming into its own in the academy.

**Fringe Literature**

In 2006, the International Association for Literary Journalism Studies was founded at the First International Conference on Literary Journalism in Nancy, France, with the goal of improving “scholarly research and education in Literary Journalism/Reportage—not journalism about literature but journalism that is literature,” according to their mission statement (“About Us”). In 2009, the first issue of *Literary Journalism Studies* (LJS), the organization’s journal, was published. In the “Note From the Editor” in that first issue, then-editor John C. Hartsock, writes that historically literary journalism has thrived during times of dramatic cultural change “because of a fundamental human need to try to understand at the more personal level the new complexities that are so much larger than us—and that threaten to overwhelm us” (J. C. Hartsock, “Note From the Editor” 5). Literary journalism is well-suited to this fundamental need precisely because of its nature as a hybrid genre that seeks to explain real events in a more personal way than typical “objective” news story. Certainly we are living in such a time of dramatic cultural change, and indeed by the final decades of the 20th century and into the start of this century, literary journalism is once again thriving. And, as we’ll see, while dramatic cultural change is a significant part of what incubates literary journalism, so too are periods of rapid media change such as the one we’re living in now. In 2013, Columbia University’s Tow Center
for Digital Journalism hosted a conference called “The Future of Digital Longform” to discuss the newfound popularity of longform stories. According to the Columbia Journalism Review (CJR), “One point of agreement throughout the day was that longform, though experiencing a new jump in popularity, is not at all a new form of writing” (Sharp). Longform is just the latest manifestation of what has long been called literary journalism. Joshua Roiland writes, “the style of writing now popularly called longform has an extended yet overlooked history, as do the debates over what to call it” (Roiland 64). This overlooked history of literary journalism—and the confusion around what to call it—is a recurring theme when it comes to the study of literary journalism. Over its nearly 150-year history the genre has come in and out of fashion among scholars of literature, journalism, and media studies, and has been frequently reintroduced to the public under different monikers, such as literary reportage, narrative journalism, creative non-fiction, the New Journalism, literary non-fiction, and narrative non-fiction, among others.

Not only has the genre found new popularity both in print and online, but scholars from a variety of disciplines—including literature, journalism, and media studies—have begun to turn their attention to the study of literary journalism in a way that is unprecedented in the genre’s long history of neglect. In that same premier issue of Literary Journalism Studies, Norman Sims notes the increasing critical attention being paid to the genre in the form of a growing numbers of post-graduate degrees across disciplines—including in English departments—that focus on the study of literary journalism. It is difficult to quantify this trend because, as Sims notes, there remains an “ancient bias,” which prevents English departments from using the term journalism in favor, often, of creative non-fiction and the like. Yet, while recent decades have seen an increase
in interest in the genre, Sims notes, “the status of literary journalism in the academy remains
tenuous” (Sims, “The Problem and the Promise of Literary Journalism Studies” 8) because of the
legacy of the ancient bias. These conditions—the increased critical attention, as well as the
tenuousness of the field—present an opportunity to call for the reinstatement of literary
journalism within literary studies. Barbara Lounsberry calls literary journalism, “the great
unexplored territory of contemporary criticism” (Lounsberry xi). And yet, the past several
decades have been a time wherein once-lost authors and genres have been rediscovered,
reevaluated and reinstated into the canon. So, too, should scholars turn their attention to literary
journalism, as the instatement of the genre in literary studies will mean further breaking down of
outmoded notions of high and low literature, broadening the scope of what we deem literature.
This is an opportunity to revise a history that has too often proved exclusionary to those deemed
outside of academia. The stakes are high; there are important cultural and media concerns—
many of them central to other inquiries in literary studies over the past decades—that are missed
when we exclude literary journalism from the broader study of literature.

The bias against literary journalism is indeed ancient, and it should be dispelled. But
before literary journalism can finally find a place under the umbrella of literary scholarship, a
new historicization of the genre is needed. This historicization should be rich and multifaceted,
as attentive to sites of marginalization within the genre as to the marginalization of the genre
itself. Even in these early days of literary journalism studies, one area that remains largely
unexplored is the important role that women have played in the genre’s development, from the
nineteenth century through today. Turning my attention to the work of women1 literary journalists serves the dual purpose of restoring writers whose work has largely been overlooked, as well as linking the history of literary journalism to the institutionalization of what we today just call “literature” through the work of women writers working in the sentimental mode in the nineteenth century.

The Marginalization of Women Literary Journalists

Due to their marginalized role in society in the nineteenth century, as evidenced by the widely accepted notion of “separate spheres” for women and men, many women writers had a vested interest in emphasizing the commonalities between their subjects and their readers. Add to this their predilection for writing in the sentimental mode—that is, emotionally evocative writing that assigns greater moral weight to empathy over reason—and it is clear that women journalists were very much at the fore of narrowing the gap between the subjectivities of their subjects and readers. While both women and writers and the emerging genre of literary journalism enjoyed a brief moment of popularity at the end of the nineteenth century, the early decades of the twentieth century saw journalism become more closely associated with a scientific approach to fact gathering and reporting. Succinct, stark prose came to be valued over narrative and description, and the cultural bent toward objectivity would soon influence literary writing as

---

1 I have thought a lot, and wrung my hands over, the use of “women” or “female” to modify the noun “literary journalist.” In terms of contemporary usage, it does appear that “women” as an apposite noun is overtaking the adjective “female,” for a number of reasons. Among these, is the association of “female” with biology—it can just as readily be applied to animals as humans—and the fact adjectives serve to further describe a noun, whereas apposite nouns add to the meaning of the noun itself. For a good discussion of this, see (“Language”).
well. The emotive, sentimental writing that had dominated both forms came to seem outmoded and, most damningly, feminine. Sara Edelstein writes, “In spite of the fact that distinctions between these discourses were not consistent or clear-cut, cultural commentators repeatedly associated factuality and truth with masculinity and sentiment with women, and the preference for ‘fact’ and ‘real science’ over sentiment worked to suppress the significance of women’s political voice” (Edelstein 64). And yet by continuing in the sentimental mode—the disparaging term “sob sisters” was coined in the first decade of the twentieth century—women’s writing took a different tact, occupying the space, as Edelstein’s book’s title suggests, “between the novel and the news.” In her introduction, she writes, “American women’s writing emerged through a dynamic, often critical, relationship with mainstream journalism” and she notes that because of this relationship, the female literary tradition is “deeply attentive to the politics of truth discourses, suspicious of objectivity, and invested in spreading alternative kinds of news” (Edelstein 2). Not coincidently, these traits also map neatly onto the—at the time emerging—genre of literary journalism.

In the nineteenth century, women writers were working against the prevailing winds that would ultimately dictate the relationship between literature and journalism precisely by standing between the two forms. Neither literature nor journalism was telling the story that women wanted to tell in the way they wanted to tell it and so they forged their own way—reporting facts in a sentimental mode—which proved to be revolutionary both in terms of subject matter and style. Even as literature moved away from sentimentalism, and as journalism moved toward an ideal of objectivity, many women writers used sentimentalism against the objective ideal to tell
the stories of those whose stories had been untold or otherwise caricatured: mill workers, the mentally ill, people of color, and, above all, women. Indeed, this hybridization of genres proved productive for women writers in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century. Judith Fetterly observes, “Writers who wished to avoid...conceptual dependency or who wished to experiment with artistic form might well have chosen to work in genres less formalized, less pretentious, and less predetermined, and therefore more open, fluid, and malleable to their uses” (Fetterley 15). Though not all of these open, fluid, and malleable genres favored by women should be considered predecessors to literary journalism, many women writers of nonfiction used elements of journalism and sentimentalism to bridge the gap between the subjectivities of their subjects and readers. That is, when Catherine Williams writes of Sarah Maria Cornell, a murdered factory worker, in her book Fall River, or Nellie Bly details the horrors she encountered in an asylum for women in Ten Days in a Mad-House, they tell true stories in a sentimental mode with the cumulative effect of bringing to life subjects that had been demonized or caricatured in the mainstream press. In this way, Williams and Bly and many other women writers in the nineteenth century were pivotal in the development of the genre that would become literary journalism.

Failing to recognize the important role that nineteenth century women journalists played in the foundation of literary journalism has led to a century-long marginalization of women who continue to work in this tradition, as well as a significant lack of consideration for the stylistic and thematic strains they employ. To illustrate this point, The Art of Fact: A Historical Anthology of Literary Journalism, often considered the most comprehensive anthology of the
genre, includes a mere four selections from women writers. While others are more attentive to the work of female literary journalists, and efforts are being made to be more inclusive (including the Spring 2015 special issue of *Literary Journalism Studies* titled “Women and Literary Journalism”), the fact remains that women are broadly underrepresented in the canon of literary journalism. This is especially true the further back one goes into the canon, but as evidenced by Kerrane and Yagoda’s anthology, which spans the entire history of the genre, the invisibility of women writers is a persistent problem. See, for example, the following graph\(^2\) in which I visualize the gender disparity in the canon of literary journalism studies. The data that I used to generate this visualization is a comprehensive bibliography of the genre, which I compiled by mining and combining already extant bibliographies, and then tagging each item with the author’s gender.

---

2 For an interactive version of the visualization, see [http://ljbib.jonathandfitzgerald.com](http://ljbib.jonathandfitzgerald.com). For more information on how it was created, see [http://jonathandfitzgerald.com/blog/2017/05/18/the-continuous-line.html](http://jonathandfitzgerald.com/blog/2017/05/18/the-continuous-line.html)
The first thing you’ll notice is that male authors far outnumber the women authors that are listed in extant bibliographies. In 1992, the year with the most publications, 38 were written by men, while 10 were written by women. And, as the bar graph makes clear, this pattern is seen across the timeline. What is perhaps most striking is that from all of the source I’ve compiled, the earliest publication by a woman writer doesn’t appear until 1936—it’s Martha Gelhorn’s The Trouble I’ve Seen. Now, certainly, far fewer women than men were being published in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but where is Margaret Fuller, or Nellie Bly, or Fanny Fern, or Nell Nelson, just to name a few? This disparity, which is seen most starkly on the left
side of the graph, is in part, because many of the earliest women literary journalists wrote in a sentimental mode, which was already falling out of favor as the genre codified around the beginning of the twentieth century and had long been considered passé by the time literary journalism studies formalized. I do not suggest that women who carried on the tradition of nineteenth century writers into the twentieth century exclusively wrote in a sentimental style—though, as we’ll see, sentimentality, as a mode is distinct from sentimentality as a style—but rather that the blindspot that rendered invisible the work of their nineteenth century predecessors persists.

This project aims to recover forgotten or underrepresented women literary journalists from the nineteenth century, illustrate how their sentimental ethos and political voice has been carried on by other, similarly marginalized women writers through the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and emphasize the great capacity of these writers to bring to life the stories of women who are often ignored or reduced to two-dimensional caricatures in the mainstream press. Prominently featuring the work of women writers in my account of the history of literary journalism also amplifies the role of sentimental writing in the origin of the genre as well as resurfaces thematic strains more associated with women writers, which scholars have tended to ignore. Thus, this work broadens the study of literary journalism by making it more inclusive and more representative of the writers who, over the past 200 years, have told true stories—written authentic accounts—in an effort to narrow the gap between the subjectivities of writer, subject, and audience.
Interrogated Sentimentality

“Sentimentality,” writes Leslie Jamison in her 2014 essay collection *The Empathy Exams*, “is an accusation leveled against unearned emotion” (Jamison 113). She goes on to quote Oscar Wilde’s famous aphorism, “A sentimentalist is simply one who desires to have the luxury of an emotion without paying for it,” by way of exploring the reasons sentimentality in literature is so much maligned. There are both moral and aesthetic criticisms of sentimentality, Jamison writes. The moral critics “attack sentimentality because it accords an undue agency to emotions,” while aesthetic critics claim sentimentality “does our emotions a disservice by flatting them into hyperbole or simplicity” (Jamison 115–16). Jamison is not so sure. She starts chipping away at the criticisms of sentimentality—a “derogatory shortcut,” she calls it—by taking issue with the shifting border between pathos and melodrama where such accusations of sentimentality are leveled. She writes, “How do we distinguish between pathos and melodrama? Too often, I think, there is the sense that we just know.” To this she frankly replies, “Well I don’t” (Jamison 116).

I’m not sure I know either. Sentimentality in literature is difficult to define, particularly from a twenty-first century perspective when, as Jamison makes clear, it’s used most often as a “derogatory shortcut,” a way to insult writing by comparing it to, say, soap operas or Hallmark cards. But in the nineteenth century, in the primordial soup of literary journalism, effective (and affective) sentimentality was a characteristic of great literature. Its cousin, sensationalism, occupied the low place now reserved for sentimentality. For a long time, however, even within literary studies, sentimentality was considered at best a historically situated blemish that must be
overlooked as we read canonized authors like Hawthorne and Melville. And, of course, the way we perceive sentimentality in nineteenth century literature is highly gendered. The bias against sentimentality has lessened in recent years as feminist scholars, in particular, return our attention to the important cultural work of popular nineteenth century writers like Harriet Beecher Stowe and E. D. E. N. Southworth, the two best selling novelists of the century. Jane Tompkins’ 1985 book *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction 1790-1860* made great strides toward reinvigorating critical attention to sentimental fiction from the nineteenth century. She turned her critical eye to sentimental writing as a response to what she calls “the extremely narrow confines of literary study as it is now practiced within the academy” (Tompkins, *Sensational Designs* xiv). Tompkins notes that “the popularity of novels by women has been held against them almost as much as their preoccupation with ‘trivial’ feminine concerns” (Tompkins, *Sensational Designs* xiv). Still, despite these efforts, sentimentality remains vaguely defined, highly gendered, and in contemporary criticism it is often issued as a derogatory shortcut.

For Tompkins part, the antidote to this rejection of sentimentality is to read literary texts as “agents of cultural formation rather than as objects of interpretation and appraisal.” This requires setting aside what she calls “modernist demands” for “psychological complexity, moral ambiguity, epistemological sophistication, stylistic density, formal economy” and attending to texts rather as “a blueprint for survival under a specific set of political, economic, social, or religious conditions” (Tompkins, *Sensational Designs* xvii). These modernist demands that so readily dismiss sentimentality as trite and unworthy of serious consideration are not eternal.
values; they are culturally situated. In light of Tompkins work, Leslie Jamison’s *The Empathy Exams* illustrate both how the bias against sentimentality persists, but also how, nearly thirty years after it was published, the work of setting aside modernist demands that Tompkins began is continued by contemporary scholars. Jamison acknowledges, “we reject sentimentality to sharpen a sense of ourselves as True Feelers, arbiters of complication, and actual emotion” (Jamison 127). This sense of ourselves is the product of these “modernist demands.” “Antisentimentality” as she calls it, is just as bad as unchecked sentimentality—it’s an “affective ego boost” (Jamison 127).

So if we set aside the “modernist demands” and reject “anti-sentimentality,” what will we see? Jamison, for her part, is forced to acknowledge that “even melodrama can carry someone across the gulf between his life and the lives of others” (Jamison 127). And here, of course, Jamison has all but identified the enduring legacy of sentimentality in literary journalism, that act of carrying someone “across the gulf between his life and the lives of others”—narrowing the gap between the subjectivities of writer, reader, and subject. If we set aside our anti-sentimental biases then, we can enter into what Tompkins called “an altered conception of what literature is” (Tompkins, *Sensational Designs* xvii). Jamison suggests we read with a sense of “interrogated sentimentality.” When we read sentimental works we have a choice, we can uncritically give ourselves over wholly to the emotion or, Jamison writes, “we can let ourselves feel without letting those feelings stand unexamined” (Jamison 130). Jamison acknowledges that she is not the first to “call for sentimentality in the wake of postmodern irony”—she points to the New Sincerity movement, a “chorus” directed by David Foster Wallace (and, today, his ghost).
Ultimately what interrogated sentimentality calls for is an awareness of “that moment when we feel sentimentality punctured” (Jamison 130). In fact, this moment may be easier to come by in nonfiction, and literary journalism in particular. As we will see in the pages that follow, the best literary journalists employ sentimentality precisely to carry readers across the gulf, but that sentimentality is always necessarily punctured because the subjects of literary journalism are not fictional characters allowed to live on in the sentimental world of their creator’s (or the reader’s) mind; rather, the characters of literary journalism are real people, existing or having existed in the real world—a place decidedly not sentimental. I argue here and throughout that Jamison’s “interrogated sentimentality” is the natural posture of literary journalism, assumed by writers and readers alike. We feel with the writer and with the subject—their subjectivities are indeed carried across to us—but in the end we are left with the realization that we can never truly know the other. We are grateful to the literary journalist for inviting us along on her journey and letting us feel with her, but inevitably the sentimentality is punctured by the reality of reality.

One might argue that contemporary literary journalists like Joan Didion do not employ sentimentality—she certainly seems to use the term, in her essay “Sentimental Journeys,” as a “derogatory shortcut”—but this is because we expect sentimentality to read a certain way. In short, we expect it to read like nineteenth century domestic fiction, with highly charged emotional language and a lot of characters crying. But we need to think about sentimentality not so much as a style, but as an ethos. Sentimental writing invites readers to feel with characters in an effort to turn those feelings into action. More than being a particular style of writing, this is sentimentality’s true legacy. As such, in this dissertation I trace sentimentalism’s path from the
origins of literary journalism in the nineteenth century (when sentimentality actually looked the way we imagine it does) through the early twentieth century when sentimentality became conflated with sensationalism in the work of the so-called “Sob Sister” journalists, and then further into the twentieth century by which time any stylistic remnants of sentimentality seemed to have disappeared but, as I’ll argue, the ethos remained.

Structure

In each of the following chapters, I pair two writers around a common theme, and the entire work progresses semi-chronologically. The first chapter considers Margaret Fuller and Nellie Bly, positions them as among the earliest literary journalists, and illustrates how their writing worked against the notion of separate spheres for men and women. Fuller and Bly, alongside many other women writers in the late nineteenth century, were caught in the conflict between the traditional, Victorian idea of separate spheres as exemplified in the “cult of true womanhood” and the emerging “New Woman” movement. And yet, at the same time, women were becoming increasingly active in journalism, and it was there, in the pages of newspapers and magazines that women instigated the New Woman movement. Whether posing as a mentally ill person to gain access to an asylum for women as Nelly Bly did in her famous *Ten Days in a Mad House*, or in Margaret Fuller’s own descriptions of her visits to women’s asylums and prisons, both women’s writing—in a conversational, sentimental mode—pushed the boundaries of women’s roles in society. This first chapter necessarily features more biographical detail about
Fuller and Bly as the story of their lives and careers, in addition to their reporting, was instrumental in challenging the notion of separate spheres.

By telling the intimate stories of women—their subjects or themselves—women literary journalists allowed their readers first to see that another way was possible, and then to imagine transcending the separate spheres themselves. Lutes writes, “Turn-of-the-century newspaperwomen, still thoroughly entangled in conventional notions of womanhood, nonetheless blazed a path in an unprecedented venue…they appeared both defiantly public and defensively feminine” (Lutes 4). In Chapter One I focus on Nellie Bly’s “stunt journalism” and Fuller’s columns as a means to write against the prevailing notions of separate spheres as well as an origin for the kind of sentimental literary journalism I describe throughout. In Fuller’s columns, slices of everyday life are infused with wit and not a small amount of moralizing in an effort to redefine the role of women in society. Bly’s journalism, on the other hand, takes readers into an asylum for women and around the world in an effort to prove that women could indeed occupy the public sphere. This opening chapter reorients the history of literary journalism by beginning not with the realist sketch, but with the sentimental story.

Along with the rise of sensationalism in the mid-nineteenth century, came the trope of the “fallen woman.” That is, while the press was full of all varieties of sensational stories, none were as successful as those that told the story of a woman who deviated from a woman’s role—crossed from the private to public sphere—and paid the price for her deviance. Many of these stories ended with the woman killed, and an understanding that, had she stayed where she belonged, such tragedy would not have befallen her. It is no coincidence that the apex of the
popularity of sentimental writing corresponds to the heyday of the sensational story in the penny press. Edelstein writes, “Sentimental fiction and the penny papers gained prominence in the print marketplace at the same moment, and both discourses touted themselves as ‘truthful’ and boasted of their commitment to instructing and guiding readers” (Edelstein 47). But whereas the sensational penny press tended to fetishize the fallen woman, sentimental writing—nonfiction and fiction alike—sought to bring understanding and an emotionally charged empathy to its readers. In short, women’s sentimental writing in the mid to late-nineteenth century worked against sensationalizing in an effort to bridge the gap between subjectivities of subject and reader created by the sensationalism.

In Chapter Two, I focus on two works of sentimental nonfiction that provide a counterpoint to prevailing media coverage of two fallen women. Catherine Williams’ 1834 book *Fall River: An Authentic Narrative* tells the story of Sarah Maria Cornell, a factory worker who was murdered by Ephraim Kingsbury Avery, a Methodist minister. After a trial that lasted nearly a month in which the Avery’s defense portrayed Cornell as a quintessential fallen woman, Avery was acquitted. Williams’ book tells Cornell’s side of the story and salvages her sullied reputation posthumously. Sentimental writing continued to vie with sensational reporting to capture the public’s attention, peaking in the early twentieth century with the rise of the so-called “Sob Sisters.” The original “Sob Sisters” were four women assigned to cover the trial of Henry Thaw who murdered Stanford White ostensibly to avenge Thaw’s wife Evelyn Nesbit Thaw, who confided to him that White had raped her when she was younger. This was the first “trial of the century,” and four major New York City newspapers took the unprecedented step of sending
women reporters to cover the trial from within the courtroom in an effort to provide readers with a feminine perspective on the sensational trial. The “Sob Sisters” reporting has largely been ignored or dismissed as overly sentimental and opportunistic, but by examining the work of one of the four, Winifred Black, we will see how she wrote against the reductive caricaturing and scandalizing of the sensational press and employed what I call sentiment against sensation.

By the 1950s, after two World Wars, the Great Depression, and the full enshrinement of the ideal of objectivity in journalism, “Sob Sister” journalism was a distant memory. Greatly reduced, as well, was the popularity of the kind of sensational reporting that dominated at the end of the nineteenth century; it was relegated to tabloids and widely considered frivolous compared to the more serious reporting of the mainstream press. But the muting of sensationalism did not mean the end of caricaturing female subjects in the mainstream press. Rather, the so-called objective news model, with its emphasis on detachment and brevity, conformed reporting to over-arching master narratives that feel true to readers, even while obscuring the essential individual truth of the characters in the stories. That is, master narratives work by way of templates and types and in so doing alienate readers from the actual subjects of stories; they widen the gap between the subjectivities of readers and subjects.

Literary journalists, not beholden to the objective model of reporting, worked against these master narratives to tell the stories of the characters behind the caricatures. In Chapter 3, I discuss two women who did just that. In 1952, Zora Neale Hurston contributed sixteen stories to the Pittsburgh Courier about the murder trial of Ruby McCollum, an African American woman accused of killing her white doctor Dr. C. LeRoy Adams. The first six stories Hurston published
tell the story of the trial, while the remaining ten provide McCollum’s life story “as a corrective to the oversimplified story that was reported in the national mainstream press,” according to Roberta S. Maguire (Maguire 17). That oversimplified story was an attempt to conform McCollum to both the Sapphire and Jezebel stereotypes of African American women. Hurston’s narrative works against these tropes by painting a picture of McCollum that portrays a complicated character, driven by a mix of motivations that intersect her race and gender.

Nearly half a century later, in 1989, another high profile crime shows the way the media defaults to master narratives to explain complicated situations. The Central Park Jogger Case details the brutal beating and rape of Trisha Meili, a successful young white women, while she was jogging in Central Park. Five teenage boys—four African Americans and one Hispanic American who came to be known as The Central Park Five—were tried and convicted of the crime. As Joan Didion investigates in her piece, “Sentimental Journeys,” the mainstream media resorted to racially charged stereotypes of both Meili and The Central Park Five, conforming the story to the “rape myth,” which describes “the rape of a frail white victim by a savage black male,” according to Valerie Smith (Smith 2). Meili was made to stand in for a range of ideals from upper class white virtuosity to the spirit of New York City itself, while The Central Park Five were described as a savage “wolfpack.” So pervasive is the rape myth that over a decade after the trials and convictions of The Central Park Five, when another person confessed to the crime and the Five were exonerated, some in the mainstream media refused to accept the reality of The Central Park Five’s innocence.
Finally, in the Coda, I further complicate the mostly male-dominated history of literary journalism by augmenting the widely accepted notion that periods of rapid social change lead to proliferations of works of literary journalism. While I affirm this rapid social change theory of the periodization of literary journalism, I add another theory, which I call the Rapid Media Change Theory. Looking back at the past two hundred years with an eye toward significant shifts in news media particularly, a convincing picture emerges. Technical innovations that lead to new media—from the penny press, to general interest and then special interest magazines, to the advent of cable news and the internet—correlate rather precisely with the four periods of literary journalism. This chapter reconsiders the history of literary journalism, from the mid-twentieth century through today, with an eye toward the way emerging media have led to the proliferation of literary journalism while paying special attention to the way media change is instrumental in ensuring that the voices of women literary journalists are amplified in each period. Indeed, the Rapid Media Change Theory aids in our understanding of how, for nearly two hundred years, women literary journalists have been working within the genre to write against prevailing narratives and caricatures of women in the mainstream media.
CHAPTER 1: MARGARET FULLER AND NELLIE BLY WRITING AGAINST THE SEPARATE SPHERES

In *True Stories*, Norman Sims writes, “Looking for literary journalism in the nineteenth century seems daunting, but it was incubating and would emerge in the large-circulation urban newspapers at the end of the century” (Sims, *True Stories* 44). This challenge opens Sims’ chapter on nineteenth century newspaper sketches, which Sims points to as the origin of literary journalism, and with broad brush strokes he describes a transition from the often-fanciful newspaper sketch to the kind of realist literary journalism we might recognize today. While Sims’ assertion that the roots of literary journalism lie in the nineteenth century is correct, his origin story only hints at a much more complicated set of circumstances that set the stage for what would become literary journalism. Most notably, Sims’ history—and by extension most commonly held histories of literary journalism—turns a blind eye to the important role women writers played in the genre’s genesis.

Indeed, the further one goes back into the nineteenth century, the less contemporary definitions of literary journalism seem to hold. Scholars of literary journalism often expend pages defining the field and delineating its qualities, particularly for what is “literary” about literary journalism. But a genre that has existed for over a hundred years, and one that has mutated as standards of both literature and journalism have changed, is difficult to pin down—a reality that most scholars of literary journalism acknowledge. And it is precisely this reality that makes John Hartsock’s criterion of literary journalism indispensable. Hartsock writes that the common thread that connects twentieth-century literary journalists to their predecessors is “the
writers’ subjectivity and the motivation to narrow the distance between subject and object” (J. Hartsock, *A History* 198). That is, journalism is literary when it goes beyond reporting the news to purposefully portraying subjects in such a way that they can be more fully understood by readers. In the nineteenth century, before the descriptors *literature* and *journalism* codified as distinct entities, the lines between fact and fiction were often blurred, and yet scholars of literary journalism agree that therein lie the roots of the genre. Using Hartsock’s criterion allows us to see those roots free of presentism and to understand the ways in which the genre materialized in the twentieth century.

With this criterion in mind, it is surprising that other scholars of the genre have largely failed to include women writers from the nineteenth century among the forerunners and early practitioners of literary journalism. The reasons these writers’ role may have been obscured are tied to the very forces that led to the marginalization of women as writers, and of journalism as a literary form. That is, at the turn of the twentieth century, sentimental writing was consigned to frivolity and the burgeoning realism elevated to the high status of “literary.” In *Between the Novel and the News*, Sari Edelstein writes, “In spite of the fact that the distinctions between these discourses were not consistent or clear-cut, cultural commentators repeatedly associated factuality and truth with masculinity and sentiment with women, and the preference for ‘fact’ and ‘real science’ over sentiment worked to suppress the significance of women’s political voice” (Edelstein 64). This suppression remains today despite efforts to reclaim sentimental writing from the nineteenth century as an object of literary study.
As her book’s title suggests, Edelstein positions nineteenth-century women’s writing “between the novel and the news,” which says much about the shifting natures of literature and journalism in the nineteenth century. In her introduction, she writes, “American women’s writing emerged through a dynamic, often critical, relationship with mainstream journalism” (1). She notes that because of this relationship, the female literary tradition is “deeply attentive to the politics of truth discourses, suspicious of objectivity, and invested in spreading alternative kinds of news” (2). This is, of course, not the “fake news” we hear so much about today, but rather the acknowledgment that who is reporting the news is as important as the content of the news. As we’ll see, women journalists in the nineteenth century often went to and reported from places, like asylums and prisons, that their readers had preconceived notions about despite the fact that they’d never visit these places themselves. Enabling readers to see those who are locked away and thus unseen through descriptions that are unabashedly subjective and sentimental was indeed an alternative kind of news.

At the fin de siècle, a scientific, “objective” understanding of the world began to take hold in literature. Meanwhile, sentimentalism, which had been the popular form for most of the nineteenth century but was on the decline, reasserted itself as a truer means of understanding reality. That is, the tail end of the nineteenth century was marked by a conflict over how to best represent reality. Roggenkamp notes, “somewhat paradoxically, medievalism, with its ‘romantic’ literary sheen, served as part of the broader push toward ‘the real thing’ in American culture” (Roggenkamp, Narrating the News 104). Sentimental writing called on readers to look beyond the triviality of everyday life for the deeper truths embedded therein. The New Journalism, in
many ways, was an attempt to bridge these modes by presenting stories that were true in the sense that they were drawn from real life, but told in a sentimental style. And certainly woman journalists such as Nellie Bly and Margaret Fuller operated within this mode in their journalism.

As Edelstein points out, women writers were working against the prevailing winds that would ultimately dictate the relationship between literature and journalism precisely by standing between the two forms. Neither literature nor journalism was telling the story that these women wanted to tell in the way they wanted to tell it, and so they forged their own way, which proved to be revolutionary both in terms of subject matter and style. Thomas Connery writes, “two categories of printed prose to depict observed life were not enough, but a third—a literary journalism—was possible and necessary” (Connery, “A Third Way to Tell the Story: American Literary Journalism at the Turn of the Century” 5). But, like many other scholars of literary journalism, Connery points to the realist sketch as the seed that spawned literary journalism, and looks especially to Stephen Crane, Lincoln Steffens, and Hutchins Hapgood as some of the earliest exemplars. What is clearly lacking in this account is the significant contribution of late-nineteenth century women journalists who wrote nonfiction narratives in a sentimental mode.

Thus, as the “sibling rivalry,” as Mark Canada calls it, between literature and journalism was ramping up, women writers were inventing a hybrid genre—at once sentimental and nonfictional—that, for the next century, would stand in the gap between the two.

Simultaneously, through the very act of forsaking the domestic sphere in favor of the decidedly public arena of the urban daily newspaper, over the course of the latter half of the nineteenth
century, these early literary journalists were modeling for their readers what it looked like to move from “True Woman” to “New Woman.”

**True Women to New Women**

Women writers in the late nineteenth century were caught in the conflict between the traditional, Victorian idea of “separate spheres” for men and women as exemplified in the “cult of true womanhood,” and the emerging “New Woman” movement. It was against this backdrop of True Woman versus New Woman that women began to enter the field of journalism, slowly at first and then, by the early decades of the twentieth century, en masse. “By the early twentieth century,” Jean Marie Lutes writes, “the metropolitan newspaperwoman was one of the most recognizable popular images of the woman writer in America” (Lutes 2). The work of early women journalists is animated by the question of a woman’s role in society, and sentimental writers like Margaret Fuller and Nellie Bly—by all accounts among the most famous women journalists of the nineteenth century—were at the front lines of securing for women a more equal place in the public sphere.

As we will see, the shift from True Woman to New Woman was played out, largely, in the pages of major metropolitan newspapers. While it is difficult to quantify with any certainty the extent to which women writers are responsible for this shift due to the anonymous nature of so much nineteenth century periodical writing, anonymity does not necessarily equal total uncertainty. It was widely understood that the kind of piecemeal writing that often was published anonymously in nineteenth century newspapers was often written by women. Thus, while we
may not be able to say definitively what impact women journalists en masse had in the move from True Woman to New Woman, there is no question that women’s voices were voluminous in the conversation that was the nineteenth century periodical press. And, with more certainty, we can look to exemplars such as Margaret Fuller and Nellie Bly, whose popularity was such an asset for the newspapers in which they published that their writing was not published anonymously. Margaret Fuller’s columns in *The New York Tribune* published in the late 1840s were signed with a star (*) and Nellie Bly’s writing in the late 1880s and 90s for *The New York World* clearly indicated her authorship in headlines and, often, her articles included illustrations of her likeness. By looking at Fuller and Bly’s newspaper writing we get a clear sense of the way they and other women journalists like Fanny Fern and Nell Nelson—not to mention countless anonymous women writers—both helped shape the discourse around women’s roles in the nineteenth century while simultaneously laying the foundation for the genre that would become literary journalism.

How did the conversation around women’s roles in the periodical press shift from the largely domestic in the early nineteenth century to increasingly public by the century’s close? Perhaps paradoxically, it is widely understood that embedded within the Cult of True Womanhood were elements that would combine to facilitate its undoing. True Womanhood taught that women were fundamentally different from men in just about every way imaginable. Thus, men and women were constrained to “separate spheres”; men’s sphere was outside the home, in the workplace and in the public. Women, on the other hand, were responsible for the private sphere, the home. And lest we imagine that the Cult of True Womanhood was little more
than a gentle suggestion of what women should aspire to, Barbara Welter, perhaps the foremost scholar on True Womanhood, disabuses us of this notion; she writes, “If anyone, male or female, dared to tamper with the complex of virtues which made up True Womanhood, he was damned immediately as an enemy of God, of civilization and of the Republic” (Welter 152). In her article “The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860” and later in her book *Dimity Convictions: the American Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, Welter surveys nearly all women’s magazines with a print run longer than three years between 1820-1860, as well as many other shortly lived publications, to paint a rather complete picture of the True Woman. She concludes that the True Woman was nothing short of “the hostage in the home” (151).

But if their prohibition from active participation in public life was nearly absolute, equally absolute was the authority they held over all things domestic. “A ‘True Woman,’” writes Susan M. Cruea, “was designated as the symbolic keeper of morality and decency within the home, being regarded as innately superior to men when it came to virtue” (Cruea 188). This moral superiority, while tempered by her perceived “emotional and physical frailty,” according to Cruea, would end up being one of the justifications for women’s increased involvement in the public sphere. “The Cult of True Womanhood laid the groundwork for the later development of feminism by crediting women with a moral authority which implicitly empowered them to extend their moral influence outside the home,” writes Cruea (190). Women’s moral influence extended to issues such as temperance, abolition, and suffrage. It followed that women’s moral authority, so necessary in the domestic sphere, might also serve the public sphere so long as it didn’t diminish or take away from their duties in the home.
The transition away from “True Womanhood” is widely understood to have taken place in several phases that spanned the latter half of the nineteenth century, culminating in the advent of the “New Woman.” While many were divided on what the rise of the New Woman portended for American civilization—did she indicate progress or was she a deviant from the natural order—once she arrived on the scene, there was no going back to the days of the True Woman. Women had entered the workforce, rose to prominence in literature, and ramped up advocacy for a political voice. Elizabeth V. Burt notes, “Even though the ‘New Woman’ was often met with derision in the mainstream press, her lifestyle and values gradually worked their way into the everyday fabric of American life” (Burt 215). Indeed, the advent of the New Woman is tied inextricably to the periodical press. In the introduction to her anthology *The American New Woman Revisited*, Martha H. Patterson notes that between 1880 and 1920, books declined as a mass medium just as periodicals rose. She writes, “The New Woman emerged from the periodical press, from which she also gained her name” (Patterson 2). Newspapers and magazines at the fin de siècle were filled with sensational stories depicting women enjoying (and sometimes suffering from) their new found freedom, images and engravings of stylish women provided an avatar for the movement, and advertisers saw tremendous opportunities for sales in the increasingly mobile middle- to upper-class white women.

Thus, the periodical press was the stage on which the New Woman made her debut. While Margaret Fuller, writing firmly in the era of the True Woman, is rightly seen as a prominent voice for women’s progress in her day, by the end of the nineteenth century the emergence of the New Woman made it possible for women writers like Nellie Bly not only to
write for the periodical press but indeed to shape it. It’s difficult to imagine a woman writer riding the tide of sensational newspaper reporting the way Bly did just a few decades earlier. But the convergence of the rise of the penny press, the popularity of New Journalism, which combined sensationalism with advocacy for social reform, and the interest (for better or worse) in the New Woman made Nellie Bly’s rise to stardom possible.

In the latter decades of the nineteenth century, women were reinventing themselves while simultaneously playing a major role in the invention of a genre, literary journalism. The emergence of the New Woman, and the trend toward greater freedom and equality for women in general is inextricably wound into the roots of literary journalism. Further, the sentimental mode still dominated writing in the periodical press, and even more specifically, women’s writing. It is the confluence of these factors—descriptive writing, advocacy, and personal perspective—that represents an often overlooked pedigree of literary journalism. By working as reporters for major New York daily newspapers and inviting their readers to journey with them to asylums and prisons—places most would never visit—women like Margaret Fuller and Nellie Bly were writing a new role for themselves beyond the domestic sphere while also writing into existence a new genre that would suit women’s voices and messages into the coming century.

**Margaret Fuller and the Pauper Establishments**

Before Margaret Fuller was a journalist, she had already been many things that were considered out of reach to most nineteenth century women. “Like most women of her day,” Jeffrey Steele writes, “Fuller grew up in a world in which men and women occupied separate
“spheres” (Steele xi). Fuller, however, forsook the domestic sphere to become a public intellectual, writer, editor, and eventually reporter. While the popular belief that Margaret Fuller was “the first self-supporting American woman journalist,” as the *Norton Anthology of Literature by Women* calls her, has been proven inaccurate, she certainly was among the most successful of her day. Mitchell writes, “Fuller is exceptional not for being first but for being extraordinarily talented” (37). He goes on to quote Fuller’s contemporary Elizabeth Cady Stanton, who wrote, “Margaret Fuller opened the way for many women, who upon the editorial staff of the great New York dailies, as literary critics and reporters, have helped impress women’s thought upon the American mind” (37). What made Fuller extraordinary, besides her status as a trailblazer, was the subject matter she covered. While it is true that other women worked as journalists, most often they worked for women’s magazines like *Godey’s Lady’s Book* and others, and their work affirmed the separate spheres mentality that ruled the day. Indeed, journalism was a “safe” career for women so long as it didn’t take them away from their primary responsibilities in the home and so long as the subject matter was firmly in the realm of the domestic. Fuller, on the other hand, “not only worked in a male-dominated venue, the daily urban newspaper, she also reported on asylums and prisons and the conditions affecting madwomen and female inmates,” writes Karen Roggenkamp (Roggenkamp, *Sympathy, Madness, and Crime* 35). Fuller’s importance as an early literary journalist, then, results from the combination of forsaking the domestic sphere herself, and, through her sentimental and empathetic writing, bringing other women with her to see places they otherwise would not see.
By 1844, Margaret Fuller was already a well known writer and editor, having edited the transcendentalist magazine *The Dial*. But in 1844, her career turned a corner when she accepted an offer from Horace Greeley to become literary editor of his new and very successful newspaper *The New-York Tribune*. The *Tribune*, founded in 1841, was among the new crop of “penny papers” that rose to prominence in the middle of the nineteenth century. It is believed that when its circulation rose to around 200,000 subscribers in the 1850s, it had the largest readership of any paper in New York, and perhaps the world. Greeley envisioned the paper as an alternative to other penny papers that thrived on sensationalism (though the *Tribune* was not immune to sensational stories) and as a venue for his own Whig party views. Additionally, Greeley intended for the *Tribune* to be an instrument of change. His intention was to “advance the interests of the people, and to promote their Moral, Political, and Social well-being” (quoted in Fuller, *Margaret Fuller’s New York Journalism* 16-17). Roggenkamp writes, “Of all the American newspaper editors in the 1840s, Horace Greeley was the most likely to take the radical step of hiring a woman as a permanent staff member” (*Sympathy, Madness, and Crime* 38). This mix of large circulation, muted sensationalism, and reform interests made the *New York Tribune* a perfect fit for Fuller, who after years of rising to prominence in New England, wished to reach a larger audience. In a 1845 letter to her brother Richard, Fuller wrote “I have given almost all my young energies to personal relations. I no longer feel inclined to this, and wish to share and impel the general stream of thought” (Fuller and Hudspeth 4:54). Fuller saw the potential to do this in the *Tribune*, even if some of her contemporaries were less convinced.
Even in the mid-nineteenth century, journalism suffered the disdain of so-called literary writers, a bias that would continue well into the twentieth century, and in some circles still persists. According to Roggenkamp, Fuller’s friend Ralph Waldo Emerson thought Fuller “had given up genuine literary calling in favor of the journalistic ‘treadmill’” (Sympathy, Madness, and Crime 41). Fuller, for her part, believed journalism to be of the utmost importance. In her Papers on Literature and Art, a collection of her writing from periodicals published in 1846, she favorably reviews a book titled (coincidentally) Margaret, or the Real and Ideal; she writes, “Of books like this, as good, and still better, our new literature shall be full” (Fuller, Papers on Literature and Art. 137). In the meantime, however, “the most important part of our literature, while the work of diffusion is still going on, lies in the journals, which monthly, weekly, daily, send their messages to every corner of this great land, and form, at present, the only efficient instrument for the general education of the people” (Papers on Literature and Art. 137–38). This general education was made possible by the penny papers as their low cost insured that the news and information they contained (as well as the sensational stories and hoaxes) was available to people in the middle and lower classes. Additionally, this democratization of the news opened the doors for women writers who, though they were often exploited for sensational effect, also used the papers as a platform for their views. Without the penny papers it is difficult to imagine such a rapid evolution from True Woman to New Woman in the latter half of the nineteenth century.

Fuller’s writing in the Tribune is hardly ever sensational; it is rather both journalistic and literary. She addresses her readers like friends; there is an epistolary nature to her writing, which,
as we’ll see, reaches its apotheosis when she travels abroad to write dispatches from Europe. Leslie E. Eckel writes, “As a journalist, Fuller is concerned not merely with reporting facts as they are, but rather with exerting her imagination through cultural commentary to reshape those facts into new forms. In essence, her journalism is creative work” (Eckel 32). This, to my mind, is as good a definition of literary journalism as one can get, particularly as it describes a writer working decades before the genre would codify. And, like many great literary journalists, Fuller was reform-minded. Eckel notes Fuller’s “explicitly political agenda that motivated her journalistic work” (Eckel 28). Interspersed among her reviews and essays that fall more squarely within the purview of her work as literary editor of the Tribune Fuller wrote convincingly about social issues of the day, including the treatment of women in prisons and mental institutions, a subject that Nellie Bly would return to later in the century.

Asylums for women in New York were over-filled both with women with legitimate mental ailments, as well as those deemed insane simply for acting outside of the accepted norms of True Womanhood. Barbara Welter writes, “The frequency with which derangement follows loss of virtue suggests…the possibility that, in the women’s magazines at least, her intellect was geared to her hymen, not her brain” (156). This was an issue of great concern to Fuller. In a letter to Maria Rotsch from January 1845, Fuller wrote, “I have always felt great interest for those women who are trampled in the mud to gratify the brute appetites of men” (4:46). At Greeley’s urging, and, significantly, accompanied by her friend William Henry Channing, Fuller had the opportunity to meet some of these women first hand at Blackwell’s Island and other poor houses, asylums, and prisons. Fuller’s writing based on her visits is unabashedly motivated by her desire
for reform. She is not an impartial spectator, in the way one might expect a contemporary journalist to be in such a situation. Rather, in sentimental prose she is calling on her readers to see the women in the prisons and asylums. Seeing is, in fact, a recurring trope in her writing from these early *Tribune* pieces. She is convinced that if readers could see those who are locked up or committed, if they could empathize with their plight, they would be moved to action. Seeing, for Fuller, is central to her ability to narrow the gap between the subjectivities of her readers and her subjects.

In the opening paragraph of her March 19, 1845 column in which she details her visits to Bellevue Alms House, the Farm School, the Asylum for the Insane, and the Penitentiary on Blackwell’s Island, Fuller sets the scene much like a fiction writer might. “The aspect of Nature was sad,” she writes, “what is worse, it was dull and dubious…The sky was leaden and lowering, the air unkind and piercing, the little birds sat mute and astonished at the departure of the beautiful days which had lured them to premature song.” She concludes, “It was a suitable day for such visits” (*Margaret Fuller’s New York Journalism* 88). Of what she calls “the pauper establishments that belong to a great city,” she writes, “They should be looked at by all, if only for their own sakes, that they may not sink listlessly into selfish ease, in a world so full of disease” (*Margaret Fuller’s New York Journalism* 88). From these opening lines, Fuller’s entire purpose is revealed—seeing should spur action. There is no question that the seeing will not be pleasant, as evidenced by the dark scene she paints, and she will not gloss over the darkness, reminding her readers of “a world so full of disease.” And yet they must look and see these places that are, by nature of their often remote geography, conveniently kept out of sight.
But for Fuller there is a right way and a wrong way to see. Later in the same article, she laments the way women and children are subject to “the gaze of the stranger.” She writes, “We were sorry to see mothers with their newborn infants exposed to the careless scrutiny of male visitors. In the hospital, those who had children scarce a day old were not secure from the gaze of the stranger” (*Margaret Fuller’s New York Journalism* 89). Here, Fuller sees her subject being seen when, she suggests, they shouldn’t be, and by people who shouldn’t be seeing them, namely men. Fuller cannot completely escape her upbringing, and demonstrates some typical class condescension toward her poor subjects when she suggests that perhaps the women in the poor house may lack the refinement to be bothered by the male gaze, and if this is the case, she writes, those with refinement “should teach it to them” (*Margaret Fuller’s New York Journalism* 89). But, she continues, appealing specifically to her female readers, “we suppose there is no woman who has so entirely lost sight of the feelings of girlhood as not to dislike the scrutiny of strangers at a time which is sacred” (*Margaret Fuller’s New York Journalism* 89). Fuller frequently calls upon her readers to identify with those she sees. She writes that the women being seen by men might instead prefer visits from fellow women, “if they can approach them with delicacy” (*Margaret Fuller’s New York Journalism* 89). Thus she suggests not only who should be seeing these women in their fragile state (other women), but how they should be seen (delicately). Her writing embodies this suggestion. She is indeed a woman approaching women with delicacy, and by making herself the lens through which her readers encounter the poor, committed, and incarcerated, she turns what might otherwise be a sensationalized voyeuristic gaze into an empathetic act of seeing.
When Fuller describes her subjects she is particularly attuned to their eyes. There are a number of descriptions of eyes as an indicator of a person’s mental state. Of a Dutch “dwarf” she encounters at Bellevue Alms House, she writes, “She had a large head, ragged dark hair, a glowering wizard eye, an uncouth yet pleasant smile, like an old child” (*Margaret Fuller’s New York Journalism* 90). Recalling an earlier visit to Bloomingdale Insane Asylum, by way of comparing that establishment to the Asylum for the Insane, she writes of the committed, “The eye, though bewildered, seemed lively” (*Margaret Fuller’s New York Journalism* 91). At Bloomingdale, the residents “felt no violent separation betwixt them and the rest of the world, and might easily return to it” (*Margaret Fuller’s New York Journalism* 91). But at the Asylum for the Insane, she writes, “insanity appeared in its more stupid, wild, or despairing forms. They crouched in corners; they had no eye for the stranger, no heart for hope, no habitual expectation of light” (*Margaret Fuller’s New York Journalism* 91). Finally, moving from the general to the specific, and in seeming contrast from the above description, Fuller describes a woman “of high poetical interest” who went insane while preparing to be a nun. “Her hair was grey, her face attenuated and very pallid, her eyes large, open, fixed and bright with a still fire” (*Margaret Fuller’s New York Journalism* 91). Thus, just as the gaze of her reader is of particular importance to Fuller, so too is the gaze of her subjects. She is very concerned by what they can or cannot see. The act of seeing, for Fuller, goes both ways and is an important means of bridging the gap between people. The insinuation is that if the two—readers and subjects—could see each other, those who could help would be motivated to do so and those in need of help might, by seeing and being seen, be helped. In the conclusion to her June 19, 1845 column, she encapsulates this
philosophy in a series of invocations to see. She entreats her readers to visit the Penitentiary at Blackwell’s Island and to:

See them in the hospital where the worn features of the sick show the sad ruins of past loveliness, past gentleness. See in the eyes of the nurses the woman’s spirit still, so kindly, so inspiring. See those little girls huddle in a corner, their neglected dress and hair contrasting with some ribbon of cherished finery held fast in a childish hand. Think what “sweet seventeen” was to you, and what it is to them, and see if you do not wish to aid in any enterprise that gives them a chance better days (Margaret Fuller’s New York Journalism 96).

There is yet another way in which Fuller’s description of her subjects seeks to make them more relatable to her readers. In the conclusion of her June 19, 1845 column in which she praises the efforts of “the ladies of the Prison Association” who had recently opened an asylum for discharged female convicts, Fuller compares the women to characters in a novel. While she laments that she can’t go directly into the homes of her affluent readers to “tell them the tales that would be sure to awaken the heart to a deep and active interest in this matter,” she imagines what she would say if she could. “Have you entertained your leisure hours with the Mysteries of Paris or the pathetic story of Violet Woodville?,” she writes citing two popular mid-century novels, “Then you have some idea how innocence worthy of the brightest planet may be betrayed by want, or by the most generous tenderness” (Margaret Fuller’s New York Journalism 96). Fuller appeals to her readers’ education in an effort to redirect their sympathies away from fictional characters and to real characters she encounters. What is particularly interesting here is Fuller’s choice of subjects. Elsewhere Fuller has written far less than favorably about sensationalist novels consumed voraciously by readers in the early- to mid-nineteenth century,
and yet here they may fulfill the purpose of arousing sympathy for her subjects. Roggenkamp writes, “In asking her readers to envision the Bellevue patients as they would characters in a novel, she insists, somewhat paradoxically, that they read this true tale...more deeply than they would a novel’s pages” (Sympathy, Madness, and Crime 45). Beyond reading the true tale, however, Fuller goes so far as to exhort her readers to see for themselves, “Do you want to link these fictions, which have made you weep, with facts around you where your pity might be of use? Go to the Penitentiary at Blackwell’s Island” (Margaret Fuller’s New York Journalism 96). For Fuller, exhorting readers to see for themselves is the next logical step in the effort to truly empathize with the incarcerated and committed.

Ultimately, Fuller’s aim in these columns is for her readers to see her subjects and to understand that they are not so far removed from the insane, impoverished, and incarcerated. Indeed in the conclusion of her February 22, 1845 column detailing her Valentine’s Day visit to Bloomingdale Asylum for the Insane, Fuller writes, “Let no one dare call another mad who is not himself willing to rank in the same class for every pervasion and fault of judgment...we are all mad, all criminal...” (Margaret Fuller’s New York Journalism 82). This identification with others is, of course, a fundamental tenet of sentimental writing. In Moral Sentimentalism, Michael Chote positions empathy as central to sentimentalism. Reflecting on Clote’s conception of empathy, Herlinde Pauer-Studer writes, “agential empathy drives us to avoid indifference in our actions towards others and includes us to feel with others” (Pauer-Studer 75). This empathy that so defines sentimental writing has subsequently come to be a defining characteristic of literary journalism as expressed in Hartsock’s notion of narrowing the gap between the
subjectivities of readers, subjects, and author. Fuller, as a sentimental writer and proto-literary journalist, embodies this empathy. Or, as Roggenkamp puts it, “Fuller pushes her audience to ‘read’ the institutional unfortunates so carefully that to read her article is to enter physically into the institution, softening all boundaries between subject, writer, and reader” (Sympathy, Madness, and Crime 45). Fuller’s invocation to her readers—and specifically her female readers—to see those who they wouldn’t otherwise see is an invitation to journey, if only by way of the page, outside of the domestic sphere they typically inhabit. This invitation is made possible only by Fuller’s own ability to transcend her sphere—out of the home and into the city room of a major metropolitan newspaper, and out from there to places that “True Women” would never otherwise see.

This thread of seeing and subsequently helping readers to see continues in Fuller’s journalism even after she leaves her position of literary editor of the Tribune. In 1848, Fuller asked Greeley if she could travel to Europe, fulfilling a life long dream, and write dispatches from her travels for the Tribune. Like her previous reporting from the asylums and prisons, the articles she sent read more like letters to friends, embodying what Leslie E. Eckel calls Fuller’s “conversational journalism.” Eckel cites Fuller herself, who writes, “Newspaper writing is next door to conversation, and should be conducted on the same principles” (quoted in Eckel 45). Newspaper writing, Fuller writes, has an advantage in that rather than addressing an individual, it addresses “the ideal presence of human nature as we feel it ought to be and trust it will be.” That is, she concludes, “We address America rather than Americans” (Fuller, Papers on Literature and Art. 2:140). While her earlier columns written while she was literary editor certainly do this,
her conversational journalism reached its apotheosis when she was reporting from abroad. Again
Eckel notes, “In Europe, she is finally able to converse directly with the ‘America’ that she
invoked as the driving force behind her journalistic endeavors” (45). Paradoxically, the physical
distance between her readers and herself serves to narrow the gap between their subjectivities.

Fuller thus imagined her readers as a kind of community. Annamarie Formichella Elsden
notes that Fuller’s “translocation to Italy ignited in her a camaraderie with the Italian people…in
addition, the epistolatory nature of her dispatches invited a certain intimacy between herself and
her readers” (Formichella Elsden 33). Elsden ascribes to Fuller a “vision of a literary and
political collective,” (33), which she tried to accomplish through her dispatches. Katrina J. Quinn
calls this “epistolary journalism” and defines it as “a form that assimilates traditions of
journalistic writing and the discursive functionality of personal correspondence” (Quinn 33). She
further notes that this form “corresponds significantly to contemporary scholars’ expectations for
literary journalism” (33–34). It also corresponds with the rise of the epistolatory novel in the
nineteenth century. And indeed, Fuller often concluded her columns as if she was writing to a
dear friend, promising more letters to follow or offering a kind of blessing or benediction as in
her January 1, 1848 dispatch, which she concludes, “To these, the heart of my country, a Happy
New Year…something of true love must be in these lines—receive them kindly, my friends; it is,
by itself, some merit for printed words to be sincere” (Fuller and Reynolds 166). Thus, in her
reporting from New York and abroad, Fuller simultaneously pushed against the notion of
separate spheres for men and women, encouraged her readers to see the other as themselves, and
ultimately contributed to the founding of what would come to be called literary journalism.
Nellie Bly and her Suffering Sisters

While Fuller might not have been the first full-time staff reporter for a major urban newspaper, there is no question that her work paved the way for others who would follow in the next half century, including Fanny Fern, Elizabeth Jordan, Nell Nelson, and most famously, Elizabeth Cochrane—known to the world as Nellie Bly. By the time Bly made her appearance on the New York journalism scene in 1887, much had changed from Fuller’s day. For one, it was more common for newspapers to employ as many as six female reporters (Roggenkamp, *Sympathy, Madness, and Crime* 80). In their quest for ever more readers, papers like the *Tribune* and *New York World* recognized a largely untapped audience in women and thus created sections specifically for women that featured stories of the more domestic nature—stories about “child rearing, fashion, society news” that male editors believed women would want to read (Roggenkamp, *Sympathy, Madness, and Crime* 80). Likewise, sensationalism, which had long been a feature of penny press newspapers, reached new heights in the era of what Matthew Arnold derisively termed the “New Journalism.” And it was precisely the public’s unquenchable thirst for sensational stories that created the opportunity for Nellie Bly to become not just a front page (and credited) writer, but ultimately a celebrity in New York and beyond. Bly’s celebrity, far from being merely a way for her to attain notoriety and wealth, is fundamental to her role in working against the notion of separate spheres. Like Fuller, Bly transcended the domestic sphere and, through her writing, allowed other women to see beyond their homes as well, but Bly went several steps beyond; she isn’t just a lens through which her readers can see her subjects, often
she is the subject. By having herself committed to the asylum on Blackwell’s Island she embodies Fuller’s gesture toward fellow feeling. And in so doing, Bly implores her readers to “feel with” her as she experiences what her ostensible subjects experience. She simultaneously embodies the act of transcending the domestic sphere while experiencing the asylum for herself and for her readers.

In 1885, Elizabeth Cochrane was living with her family in Pittsburgh. She had dropped out of boarding school and was unemployed. But that all changed after she read a column later titled “Woman’s Sphere” in The Pittsburgh Dispatch. The column, written by Erasmus Wilson (also known by his nom de plume, “The Quiet Observer”), offered advice to a reader who identified himself as “Anxious Father.” He was anxious, it turns out, about his five unmarried daughters and he sought advice from Wilson as to what to do about them. Jean Marie Lutes writes, “In his published reply, Wilson did not answer the question. Instead he insisted that homemaking was the only proper occupation for women, criticized a society in which parents did not have time to raise their children properly, and suggested, in jest, that the United States might eventually have to follow China’s example and kill their girl babies” (Bly and Corrigan 3). Wilson concludes, “Her sphere is defined and located by a single word—home” (Kroeger 36). This did not go over well with then Elizabeth Cochrane who at the time was 20 years old. She penned a letter to the Dispatch in response and signed it “Lonely Orphan Girl.” The paper’s editor George Madden was so struck by the letter that he “printed a notice asking the author to identify herself” (Bly and Corrigan 3). When Cochrane showed up to claim responsibility for the letter, “Madden asked her to write a column about ‘the woman’s sphere’” (Bly and Corrigan 3).
The article that resulted, which bore the title “The Girl Puzzle,” was published in the *Dispatch* on January 25, 1885, and was Bly’s first publication.

“What shall we do with our girls?”, Bly begins the article, before making clear she’s not referring to those who are well off, but rather “those without talent, without beauty, without money” (Bly and Corrigan 4). Like Margaret Fuller often does, Bly calls out the wealthy women who “have a comfortable home, a loving husband, sturdy, healthy children, fond friends,” and asks, “shall you cast the first stone?” (Bly and Corrigan 5). She notes that many of the occupations traditionally held by women are full and asks “why not start some new ones?” (Bly and Corrigan 6), after which she lists a number of jobs that women might do as well, or better, than men. Near the end of her column she calls out “believers in women’s rights” and calls upon them to “forego their lecturing and writing and go to work; more work and less talk” (Bly and Corrigan 6). And, she concludes, “We shall talk of amusements for our girls after we find them employment” (Bly and Corrigan 8).

After her article caused quite a stir, Madden hired Bly because, according to Belford, he “thought it would be profitable to have a woman reporter” (Belford 119). It was Madden who gave Cochrane the pen name Nellie Bly when he heard a copyboy whistling the popular Stephen Foster song (Belford 119). The song was titled “Nelly Bly,” though, Kroeger writes, “In his haste, Madden had not been faithful to the spelling” (Kroeger 44). Bly worked for the *Dispatch* for nine months, at first writing stories about controversial topics like divorce and exposés on Pennsylvania’s Western Penitentiary and sweatshops before convincing Madden to let her serve as the *Dispatch’s* correspondent in Mexico. In Mexico, her stories attracted negative attention
from the Mexican government, and she was ordered to leave. She returned to the Dispatch briefly, but was dissatisfied with the society beat to which she—like many other women reporters—had been assigned. After just three months, she quit; or, more accurately, she just stopped showing up. Kroeger reports that Erasmus Wilson and the rest of the Dispatch staff didn’t know where she was until a note addressed to Wilson was discovered that read, “Dear Q.O.—I am off for New York. Look out for me,” and signed, simply, “Bly” (Kroeger 75).

The commonly told story of Nellie Bly’s arrival in New York City has her all but knocking down the doors of the major newspapers to secure job interviews with editors. But like much of Bly’s biography, the mythos of Nellie Bly bears little resemblance to the reality. In fact, it took several months for Bly to secure an interview with John Cockerill, managing editor of The New York World, which, by the late 1800s, had overtaken The New York Tribune and others to become the leading newspaper in New York. In her meeting with Cockerill, Bly suggested a number of stories, including traveling to Europe and returning to the United States to report on the immigrant experience. Cockerill didn’t go for it, but he didn’t immediately dismiss her either. He told her that he would talk to World’s owner Joseph Pulitzer about her and he paid her twenty-five dollars as a retainer (Kroeger 85). When they met again, Cockerill had a pitch for Bly, to get herself committed to the Women’s Lunatic Asylum on Blackwell’s Island—the same asylum that Fuller had reported from almost a half century earlier.

With some trepidation, Bly accepted the assignment and set out to the task of feigning insanity and getting committed. The story that resulted appeared in two parts on October 9 and
16, 1887 and was later collected and revised in book form as Ten Days in a Mad-House. The stories catapulted Bly from a virtually unknown reporter in New York to a national celebrity.

One can recognize in Bly’s stories the same impetus that impelled Fuller, to help readers see the plight of the women in the asylum. In fact, Bly’s stories led to reforms in the way patients were treated in New York asylums. But there are significant and important differences between Fuller and Bly’s reporting from Blackwell’s Island that illustrate the trajectory from True Woman to New Woman. Fuller pushed against the notion of separate spheres, of course, but writing in the 1840s she was still constrained by the dominance of the Cult of True Womanhood. Recall, for instance, that when she visited the poorhouses, prisons, and asylums, she was accompanied by her friend William Henry Channing. Forty years later, Nellie Bly went undercover at Blackwell’s Island alone. Then, two years later Bly performed her most famous stunt, traveling solo around the world in 72 days (her aim was to complete the trip faster than Jules Verne’s fictional Phileas Fogg’s 80 day trip). Ultimately, these stunts ushered in a new brand of sensational journalism called stunt reporting that saw women journalists enter the public sphere like never before.

Writing at the end of the nineteenth century, in the age of the New Woman, also allowed Bly to shift the emphasis in her story from being primarily about reform—though that is a significant part of what she was trying to accomplish—to being primarily about her stunt and herself. Thus, while Fuller’s account is simultaneously serious and sympathetic, Bly’s story is self-consciously sensational. And, while Fuller certainly writes herself into her stories, acting as a kind of guide through the asylums and prisons she visits, the subject of her empathy and the empathy she is attempting to invoke from her readers is always the patients and inmates. Bly’s
story, on the other hand, is the reverse of this. Patients’ stories appear in her pieces, but they are never the focus. From the moment the story begins, it is clear that Bly, herself, is the subject and, as Roggenkamp writes, “the right recipient of her audience’s sympathetic gaze…a leading actress in her own literary drama” (Roggenkamp, *Sympathy, Madness, and Crime* 77). Situating herself as the subject of her stories, however, does not diminish her ability to evoke readers’ sympathies and ultimately for those sympathies to find their way to women committed in the asylum. Rather, by experiencing the institution first hand, Bly allows her readers to imagine themselves in a similar situation, to feel what she is feeling and ultimately to empathize with the wrongly committed women who she meets. Further, Bly works specifically against the label of derangement or insanity for women who attempt to live a life outside the domestic sphere by showing first that she is not insane and then helping readers see other wrongly committed women. In so doing, she pushes ever further into the public sphere and makes way for other women to follow.

Bly begins “Behind Asylum Bars” by describing how she came to the assignment, “On the 22d of September I was asked by THE WORLD if I could have myself committed to one of the Asylums for the Insane in New York, with a view to writing a plain and unvarnished narrative of the treatment of the patients therein…” (Bly and Corrigan 19). The narrative, she writes, is to be about the treatment of patients, but is clear from the beginning that it is also about her. She goes on to describe her preparations for the assignment, brandishing her confidence in her own abilities to pull it off, even while noting her apprehensions. She writes, “Could I pass a week in the insane ward at Blackwell’s Island? I said I could and I would. And I did” (Bly and Corrigan
Among the challenges she anticipates is convincing professionals trained to diagnose insanity that she is, in fact, insane. “How could I hope to pass these doctors and convince them that I was crazy?…I began to think my task was a hopeless one,” she writes before adding, in what would become her signature bluster, “But it had to be done” (Bly and Corrigan 19). Indeed, she did convince several doctors, reporters, policeman, and a judge that she was insane, a feat that says much about the readiness of male authorities to deem women insane. On more than one occasion in her account, these professionals suggest that perhaps Bly is a “fallen woman.” A doctor who, oddly, claims to recognize her, asks, “Tell me, are you a woman of the town?” To which Bly replies “I do not understand you” while noting she was “heartily disgusted with him.” He clarifies, “I mean have you allowed the men to provide for you and keep you.” At this, Bly writes, “I felt like slapping him in the face” (Bly and Corrigan 43). She doesn’t slap him, of course, but like the other women in the asylum absorbs the insinuation that comes with a diagnosis of insanity in the late nineteenth century. Later, when Bly is examined by a Dr. Field, she notes that he only asks her a few questions, which, she decides “had no bearing on my case” (Bly and Corrigan 48). She writes, “The chief question was of my home and friends, and if I had any lovers or had ever been married” (Bly and Corrigan 48). The other patients, Bly says, were asked the same questions.

Readers would not have been surprised that these questions would have been asked of so-called “fallen women,” but to read them asked of Bly, who by early on invoking readers’ empathy has established herself as a peer to her readers, allows them to absorb how shocking and misguided this line of questioning is. For readers to empathize with the women in the asylum,
then, it is essential that they first relate with Bly. In this way, Bly is a bridge between her readers and subjects, a temporary way station for readers’ sympathies on the course to understanding what it must be like to find oneself labeled insane. As we’ll see, Bly’s sympathies lie specifically with those, like her, who are incorrectly diagnosed and it is for these women that she hopes to generate fellow feeling in her readers.

In order to achieve this, Bly, like Fuller, puts a specific emphasis on the act of seeing and to the eyes themselves as indicators of one’s mental state. But where Fuller does not explicitly distinguish between the truly mentally disturbed patients and those who have been wrongly committed, Bly reserves her sympathies for those patients who, like herself, are the victims of misdiagnosis. That is, during her stay in the asylum she befriends and tells the stories of many women who have been committed despite being perfectly sane (according to Bly), while she avoids and is often even disgusted by those who are actually insane. Upon arriving at the asylum, she writes that despite the fact that she knows that she’s not insane and that she’ll be released after a few days, “my heart gave a slight twinge.” This twinge comes at the knowledge that she will be “a companion, day and night, of senseless, chattering lunatics; to sleep with them, to eat with them, to be considered one of them, was an uncomfortable position” (Bly and Corrigan 52). While this could be read as unsympathetic, and indeed it is not a charitable view of the women in the asylum, it also serves to gain her readers’ sympathies. More perhaps than a reminder that she is not one of the actually insane, it is a reminder to her readers that she is like them and thus an invitation for readers to continue to follow her into the madhouse.
In Bly’s account, the women who are deemed insane are often gawked at and examined, but never truly seen. This is, in fact, how she is able to pass for an insane person. While she awaits an audience with a judge, she observes “a sprinkling of well-dressed, well-fed officers watching the scene passively and almost indifferently. It was only an old story with them. One more unfortunate added to a long list which had long since ceased to be of any interest or concern to them” (Bly and Corrigan 33). Once she’s deemed insane, most of the people she encounters—with a few exceptions including her roommate at the boarding house, a sympathetic judge, and one of the last doctors to examine her—take her insanity for granted and cease to see her as a full person. While Bly takes the time to consider all of the women around her, she reserves her friendship and attention, and, ultimately her sympathy for the misdiagnosed.

Contrast, for example, Bly’s reaction to seeing a group of women who she is told are “the most violent on the island” with the sympathies she pours out for the sane women she befriends. Upon seeing the “violent” women parade by, tied to one another by “a long cable rope fastened to wide leather belts,” she writes, “I eagerly watched the passing lines and a thrill of horror crept over me at the sight” (Bly and Corrigan 65). She describes their “vacant eyes and meaningless faces” and their tongues, which “uttered meaningless nonsense” (Bly and Corrigan 65). She concludes “The horror of that sight to one who had never been near an insane person before was something unspeakable” and notes that her friend, Miss Neville, who Bly has deemed sane says, “It is so dreadful I cannot look” (Bly and Corrigan 66). Here Bly expresses horror and disgust, nothing like the sympathy she extends to those she deems sane, but still she looks. She “watched the passing lines” and remarks at the “horror of that sight,” in contrast to Miss Neville who
“cannot look.” Bly’s readers might well identify more with Miss Neville, but by looking and describing what she sees, Bly directs her readers’ eyes and holds their gaze there, if only for a moment.

Her sustained gaze and her empathy, however, are reserved for others, like Miss Tillie Mayard, a young girl who Bly deems as sane. Mayard says that she had been sick and is now “suffering from nervous debility” (Bly and Corrigan 44). She tells Bly that her friends sent her to be treated, but she doesn’t know where she is, and Bly doesn’t tell her. But she eventually finds out. After her examination with Dr. Field, he asks her if she is just now finding out where she is, to which she replies, “Yes, my friends said they were sending me to a convalescent ward to be treated from nervous debility, from which I am suffering since my illness,” before adding, “I want to get out of this place immediately” (Bly and Corrigan 48). Little chance of that however; Bly notes the doctor refuses to test Mayard any further and, “he left the poor girl condemned to an insane asylum, probably for life, without giving her one feeble chance to prove her sanity” (Bly and Corrigan 48). A short time later, Mayard again pleads her case to yet another doctor, Dr. Kinier. Bly writes that Mayard’s remarks were “as rational as any I ever heard,” but again they fell on deaf ears. “Poor girl, how my heart ached for her,” writes Bly. “I determined then and there that I would try by every means to make my mission of benefit to my suffering sisters; that I would show how they are committed without ample trial” (Bly and Corrigan 53). Mayard was brought back out to the waiting room and Bly continues to listen in as a succession of women are similarly denied the opportunity to prove their sanity. A German woman is deemed insane and
doesn’t speak any English and is thus not able to defend herself. Likewise, a Mrs. Fox and Miss Neville meet similar fates.

Readers trust that Bly is not insane as she has gone to great pains to prove it to them throughout the piece, and, similarly, Bly shows that Miss Mayard, Mrs. Fox, and Miss Neville have been wrongly committed. These are the women that Bly wants her readers to empathize with. These are her “suffering sisters.” And showing that they are wrongly committed is her mission. Ultimately, she accomplishes this. Her story is credited with having led to a million dollar increase in the budget of the Department of Public Charities and Corrections—in the book version of her story, Ten Days in a Madhouse, Bly takes credit for this though in reality the wheels may have already been in motion for the funding increase. But beyond evoking empathy for herself and the other wrongly committed women in her story, at this early stage in her career, Bly is out to prove herself. Whereas Margaret Fuller moved outside of her sphere through the act of joining the staff of a major metropolitan newspaper and reporting on places that women of her class typically did not go, Bly went a step further by embedding herself in the asylum and the fame that followed is a testament to just how far outside the domestic sphere she had travelled. She wasn’t just a woman journalist working in the male-dominated world of newspaper reporting, she was a celebrity. And indeed she inspired countless other women to follow in her footsteps.

Beyond the fame that followed, Bly instigated a new genre in journalism, stunt reporting. Jean Marie Lutes writes of the significance of stunt reporting, “in the history of journalism, women’s writing, and women’s access to the public sphere in America” (Lutes 14). She goes on
to say that though Bly and other stunt reporters “were often scorned by more traditional journalists...they were the first newspaperwomen to move, as a group, from the women’s pages to the front page, from society news into political and criminal news” (Lutes 14). Karen Roggenkamp echoes Lutes assertion, writing that Bly’s brand of professionalism “would in her time influence how some women could break into the masculine stronghold of the ‘city room.’ It was, ultimately, writing built on feminine publicity and the reporter who moved outside the confines of private, domestic spaces in dramatic, unprecedented ways” (Roggenkamp, Sympathy, Madness, and Crime 77). Bly began her career as a journalist by challenging the notion of separate spheres in her Pittsburgh Gazette piece, asking “what shall we do with our girls?” and arguing for new career opportunities for women. Rather than wait for this to happen, just over two years later, she redefined the entire field of newspaper reporting and made room for other women to join her ranks.

Ultimately, Bly, like Fuller, sheds light on the places that her readers would not otherwise see. But whereas Fuller can be seen holding a torch and casting light into the dark corners, Bly is in the spotlight, illuminating herself while allowing some of the ambient light to fall on the patients of Blackwell’s Island. This is not to diminish Nellie Bly; her constellation of motivations included the kind of reform that Fuller sought, but, writing at the end of the nineteenth century, she had the opportunity to envision more. She simultaneously sought to end the association of the “fallen woman” who forsakes the domestic sphere with insanity while making a way for women to push ever further into the public sphere. And through her inauguration of stunt
reporting she launched a new form of reporting that would become central to literary journalism, what today we call immersion reporting.

**Defiantly Public & Defensively Feminine**

Both Fuller and Bly transcended the domestic sphere to which women in the nineteenth century were relegated and in so doing they invite their readers—especially women—to transcend with them. Through their reporting from Blackwell’s Island they offer the opportunity for their middle class readership to encounter, to see, incarcerated women who they otherwise would likely never encounter. Fuller and Bly acknowledge the power in the act of seeing, as well as its pitfalls. Thus they subvert the male gaze that women in asylums are often subjected to in favor of an empathetic acknowledgment of the others’ humanity. Bly, taking it a step further, deflects the male gaze from her subjects by allowing herself to absorb it. She sees through first-hand experience as she puts herself in the subject position, in order for her to see and for readers to see through her. In both cases, Fuller and Bly affirm their foundational status in the history of literary journalism by fulfilling what would come to be its signature feature—they narrow the gap between the subjectivities of their subjects, their readers, and themselves.

Exceptional as Margaret Fuller and Nellie Bly are, they are not exceptions; they are representative of a larger trend of early women literary journalists in the mid- to late-nineteenth century. Here I follow Barbara Friedman and her co-authors in encouraging scholars to “rethink our finding”; to ask, “If we’ve found this exception, might there be others? Might common sense be wrong?” (Friedman et al. 162). These scholars caution against the “add women and stir”
(Friedman et al. 160) approach to integrating women’s experiences into the study of media history. They continue, “We need to resist the common historical urge to understand people as slices or snapshots of achievement. This is especially true of how we historicize successful women and minorities, because we do tend to think of them as exceptions” (Friedman et al. 162). Rather, I focus in this chapter on Fuller and Bly because, writing nearly half a century apart as they do, they act as fitting bookends to this earliest period in the genesis of literary journalism. Additionally, their shared interest in the lives of women who society deems insane models vividly the high stakes for women of venturing outside the domestic sphere. But there are of course other nineteenth century women journalists who may have been discussed here including Fanny Fern, who also wrote about women in asylums, Elizabeth Jordan, who wrote a column detailing city life in New York, or Nell Nelson, who wrote about, among other things, the poor working conditions for women in Chicago’s manufacturing industry. Indeed, Fuller and Bly represent a growing movement that would lead not just to the further integration of women into the newsroom in the twentieth century, but, along with their male counterparts, to the birth of the genre we call literary journalism.

What all of these early literary journalists have in common is that by telling the intimate stories of women—their subjects and themselves—they wrote into existence a world in which women could transcend their separate spheres. Lutes writes, “Turn-of-the-century newspaperwomen, still thoroughly entangled in conventional notions of womanhood, nonetheless blazed a path in an unprecedented venue...they appeared both defiantly public and defensively feminine” (Lutes 4). And the path they blazed off of the society pages and onto the
front page would lead them, as we’ll see in the next chapter, to the nefarious world of crime reporting.
On December 21, 1832, a young woman of 29 years was found dead, hanging from a pole on the farm of John Durfee, in Tiverton, Rhode Island. Her name was Sarah Maria Cornell and she was unmarried and pregnant. Initial witnesses on the scene, including Durfee and a few of his neighbors, made note of the corpse’s appearance and positioning before lowering the body to the ground where, because rigor mortis had set in, it awkwardly slumped despite the men’s efforts to lay it on its back in a more peaceful looking repose. The coroner was called for and, over the next hour, news spread to nearby Fall River, where Cornell had been employed as a mill worker in a cotton factory. In time, mill overseers and local ministers arrived on the scene in hopes of identifying the body. Some observed that Cornell was “well dressed,” suggesting she may be “somebody respectable” (Williams 27). Ira Bidwell, a Methodist preacher, said he recognized the woman, and added, “she is a respectable young woman and member of my church” (Williams 27).

While it seemed, at least initially, that Cornell had committed suicide, in the days that followed, new evidence emerged. The first indication came from the testimony of Cornell’s doctor Thomas Wilbur. Cornell had called upon Dr. Wilbur weeks earlier when she wasn’t feeling well and it was he who identified her pregnancy. Dr. Wilbur noted Cornell’s “air of extreme dejection” and asked if she was married. She said that she was not, to which he replied,

---

3 For a well-researched and thorough account of the murder of Sarah Maria Cornell and the trial of Ephraim Avery, see (Kasserman).
“If you were a married woman I should be apt to tell you what I thought, but as it is I scarcely know what to say, except it is my opinion you will not be able to work in the factory much longer.” To which he added, “you have been the prey of a villain” (Williams 21).

The villain, Cornell finally admitted to Dr. Wilbur, was a Methodist minister named Ephraim Avery, and in the days following Cornell’s death he became the prime suspect in a murder case. When John Durfee’s wife and other townswomen were preparing Cornell’s body for interment, they found her covered in bruises. Durfee’s son, who had been a sailor, identified the knot used to tie the rope around Cornell’s neck as a clove hitch, significant because a clove hitch does not synch and thus could not have been used for hanging. And, most damningly, among Cornell’s possessions was found a note, written in her hand, that read “If I should be missing enquire of the Rev Mr Avery of Bristol he will know where I am Dec 20th S M Cornell” (Kasserman 9).

Avery was arrested and the trial that followed lasted 27 days—the longest trial in the history of the young United States (Kasserman 1). And, of course, as such trials involving scandalous circumstances continue to do today, the case captured the imagination of the nation and beyond through newspaper reporting as well as the number of published court proceedings, pamphlets, and books that followed. Throughout the coverage of the trial, it was always about more than the murder of a pregnant mill worker by a clergyman. David Richard Kasserman writes, “Public enthusiasm stemmed partly from the case’s dramatic particulars…The extent and intensity of general interest, however, had another source in the symbolic and institutional associations of the two people involved” (Kasserman 2). That is, Sarah Maria Cornell came to
symbolize different things to different people. Was she, as Ira Bidwell first recounted, “a respectable young woman” and churchgoer (Bidwell later walked back this testimony upon learning that his fellow Methodist minister Ephraim Avery was Cornell’s accused murderer). Or, was Cornell a paradigm of the hard-working and newly independent women who left home to find work in the mills? If so, industry had faltered in its promise to protect the women who joined the work force. Was she the innocent victim of a salacious minister who took advantage of his position to seduce her? Or, on the other hand, did she represent a growing religious fanaticism at the time often associated with the Methodist denomination, which ultimately led her to seduce Avery?

Reports on the case could portray her as any or all of these things. Take, for example, the July 6, 1833 account in the Richmond Palladium, from Richmond, Indiana, published just over a month after the trial ended. While the report, which claims to be reprinted from the New England Hartford Review, is generally pitying of Cornell, it states, “whether she fell by the hands of the Rev. Ephraim K. Avery, or committed suicide, she was the voluntary author of the disasters that marked her pilgrimage in this world of sorrow” (Richmond Palladium). In short, as a “fallen woman,” she got what was coming to her. The article goes on to note that while she was born into unfortunate circumstances and suffered from “the want of parental care and instruction”—her father abandoned the family when she was still a baby—the real problem perhaps was her temperament, which predisposed her to religious fanaticism: “there is a line where religion and piety terminates and enthusiasm begins, and it is supposed by those who are most conversant with the facts, that Maria overstepped this line and wandered away into the mazy and unexplored
regions of religious fanaticism.” As a result of this fanaticism, “it is not irrational to suppose that the most extravagant notions would follow.” By identifying “fanaticism” as the culprit—as we’ll see, it’s a popular villain in the early nineteenth century—the article simultaneously affirms readers’ biases while stoking their ire against fanatics, or, more specifically, Methodists. The article also cites Cornell’s wandering—many women who went to work in mills often traveled among mill towns looking for work—as well as her “numerous oddities and eccentricities, and…frequent aberrations of mind” (Richmond Palladium).

The Richmond Palladium article concludes, “In justice to ourselves, and out of regard to the relatives of the deceased…the facts we have thus given in relation to Miss Cornell would not have been published in this paper, had not the whole catalogue of her oberrations [sic] been disclosed by the trial of Rev. Ephraim K. Avery” (Richmond Palladium). Indeed, Cornell’s aberrations had been disclosed by the trial proceedings, pamphlets, and, at the start of what would come to define the print era throughout the rest of the nineteenth century, through sensational reporting in newspapers across the country and abroad. A short report published in London’s True Sun newspaper on June 23, 1833, titled “Extraordinary Trial,” relates that an issue of the New York Journal of Commerce⁴, which True Sun’s editors had obtained, contains “four-and-twenty columns…exclusively occupied with the details of the trial” (“Extraordinary Trial”). While the True Sun report is short on details, it recounts Rev. Avery’s “improper intimacy” with Cornell—described as “a young and interesting female”—and notes she “was found bound to a stake, and marks of strangulation were visible on her neck” (“Extraordinary Trial”). The murder

⁴ I was, unfortunately, unable to turn up an original copy of the New York Journal of Congress.
and trial, the articles states, “excited the most intense interest all through the northern portion of the United States of America” (“Extraordinary Trial”). Ultimately, on June 2, 1833, Avery was acquitted of the murder—a decision that surprised and enraged many in Fall River and further damaged the reputation of the deceased.

As early as the 1830s, sensational reporting of significant crimes, particularly those that involved women, was becoming a staple of newspaper reporting. It gained steam over the course of the century, particularly after the penny press ushered in the era of yellow journalism. Too often, perhaps as a result of their temporal proximity, sensationalism and sentimentalism are conflated and used interchangeably, but they are in fact opposites—sensationalism operates by making readers vividly aware of the otherness of others, whereas sentimentalism prompts readers to see themselves in others. Where sensational writing dehumanizes via repulsion and caricature, sentimental writing seeks to humanize by invoking a sense of fellow-feeling, allowing readers to imagine themselves in the position of a story’s subject. Heather Leland Roberts describes the contrast:

Sensational writers stage scenes of violence and sexual peril to elicit readerly emotions ranging from erotic excitement to fear and repulsion. Sentimentalists, on the other hand, favor scenes of pathos—classically epitomized in the spectacle of the dying child—intended to awaken readers’ sympathy, sorrow, and affection. To put it more broadly, sensationalism depends upon bloodshed for its audience appeal, while sentimentalism traffics in tears. (Roberts 4)

Thus, Roberts writes, “sentimental and sensational authors often wrote in response to, and in implicit dialogue with, one another’s work; many presented their own representations of urban reality as needed correctives to those published in the other mode” (Roberts 4). Many
writers working in the sentimental mode, then, wrote against the sensationalists’ desire to make
readers fearful and repulsed by the otherness of others in favor of sympathy and fellow-feeling. I
call this move *sentiment against sensation*, and it has been a primary feature of literary
journalism since before the genre even formalized.

Like sentimentalism, sensationalism appeals to readers’ emotions, but the two differ
significantly in their treatment of subjects and thus the readers’ emotions they appeal to.
Sentimentalism “is premised on an emotional and philosophical ethos that celebrates human
connection, both personal and communal, and acknowledges the shared devastation of
affectional loss,” according to Joanne Dobson (Dobson 266). Whereas, according to David M.
Stewart, the “affects of sensationalism” are grief, fear, shame, and rage (Stewart 383). In order to
stimulate these negative emotions, sensational writing often caricatures its subjects—as was the
case with Sarah Cornell—reducing them to readily available stereotypes. Through sentimental
writing, readers can be moved to empathy when they experience a character as a fellow human,
or, through sensationalized reporting, they can be spurred to outrage when they recognize the
violation of a dehumanized, or caricatured, type. Stewart points to the murder of Mary Phagan, a
13-year-old factory worker in Atlanta allegedly killed by her employer Leo Frank, to illustrate
how caricaturing a victim in sensational reporting can be used to evoke outrage. Media coverage,
Stewart writes, identified Phagan “with the rhetorical mainstay of popular reform, little Eva
[from *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*] and the vast number of figures like her (feminine, though, like Uncle
Tom, not always female) whose violation (by slaveholders, drunkards) not only influenced public
opinion, but changed how Americans behaved and felt about themselves” (Stewart 383). Indeed,
sensationalism, like sentimentalism, has been used to spur reform, but it is predicated on outrage rather than empathy. Further, Stewart writes, sensationalism “cannot be reduced to a list of contents and formal features, the affects of which travel poorly, between audiences or across time” (Stewart 382). This is true of sentimentalism as well, both are spatially and temporally contingent. Sensationalism in particular is defined more by its handling of specific subjects—bodies, and often those of women—than on any specific formal qualities. Even with these caveats, however, crimes involving women—what Stewart calls “violated femininity”—have long been the subject of sensationalist writing in part because violated femininity has been and remains a salacious taboo.

And yet throughout the reign of yellow journalism and beyond, another kind of report, written mostly by women, acted as a counterbalance to the sensational press. In these stories, sometimes published in books and pamphlets but more often in the same newspapers that carried sensationalized versions of the news, women writing in the sentimental mode sought to work against the caricaturing of female subjects in an effort to humanize them. As we will see, Catherine Williams paints a sentimental portrait of Sarah Maria Cornell in an effort to work against the caricatures of Cornell in the popular press. Then, nearly a century later, sentiment against sensation was embodied in the work of the so-called “Sob Sisters”—newspaperwomen like Winifred Black and others who injected sentiment into their reporting of otherwise sensationalized stories. “Sob sister” was a derogatory term and the writers to whom it was assigned were denigrated not so much for writing sentimental accounts, but rather for allegedly writing such accounts in an effort capitalize on the emotions of readers. Thus, the terms
sentimental and sensational were conflated, and the “Sob Sisters” were accused of sensationalizing. “Sob sister” journalism reached the height of its influence just as the ideal of objectivity codified as the *modus operandi* of modern reporting, thus leading to a backlash against what was perceived as overtly sensational journalism. In time, sentimental writing would likewise be denigrated in both journalism and literature and its conflation with sensational writing would become nearly universally accepted. In recent years, scholars like Jane Tompkins and others have made significant strides toward reconsidering the bias against sentimental writing. If we follow Tompkins and examine the writing of Catherine Williams and the “Sob Sisters” through their “cultural work” as “the bearers of a set of national, social, economic, institutional, and professional interests” we can reclaim them, and restore their place in the canon of literary journalism—and indeed literature in general—through an altered conception of what literature is (Tompkins, *Sensational Designs* xii). Tompkins worked to cultivate “an altered conception of what literature is,” just as I am working to create an altered conception of what literary journalism is by rewriting its origin story in such a way that is inclusive of women writers working in a sentimental mode against the sensationalism with which it is too often conflated. To get to the roots of sentiment against sensation, however, we must return to the early 1800s, before sensationalism fully took hold in the press, and to the murder of Sarah Cornell in Fall River, Massachusetts.
Catherine Williams and Fall River's "Fallen Woman"

In 1834, Catherine Williams, a writer and native of Rhode Island, published Fall River: An Authentic Narrative as a corrective to the story of Sarah Maria Cornell, which Williams writes, “has been hitherto treated in such an indecent manner.” She notes that trial reporting “does not treat of things in their proper order” and “none but what is called legal evidence is admissible.” Williams’ greatest objection to the trial is “it is not fit for any body to read.” Thus, she set out to write, “a narrative…that would embrace the facts, without any of the odious details in the trial” (Williams 1). Williams frames her account, also, as a “warning to young women.” She, like the article in the Richmond Palladium, calls out “that baneful disposition to rove,” but warns more aggressively against “that idolatrous regard for ministers” (Williams 1). Fall River begins with a history of the eponymous town and a description of its geographical uniqueness. Her story about Sarah Cornell opens not with the murder or the trial, but rather nearly two months before Cornell was killed, on October 8, 1832, when an unnamed doctor\(^5\) first visits Cornell. Williams details their first meetings in which Cornell told the doctor of her “encounters” with Reverend Avery. Williams then goes on to describe the murder and the trial, present the life story of Cornell, transcribe Cornell’s letters, and conclude with an “appendix” in which she reports on a Methodist camp meeting Williams attended as a means of explaining her view of “the great evil of fanaticism generally, and of Camp-Meetings in particular” (Williams 164). For

---

\(^5\) It’s unclear why Williams chose not to provide Doctor Wilbur’s name, though he is identified in a footnote on page 33 as Dr Wilbour.
Williams, it is the religious fanaticism typified by Methodist camp meetings that leads to “that idolatrous regard for ministers” that was ultimately Sarah Cornell’s downfall.

In the Appendix to *Fall River*, Williams is blunt in her criticisms of Methodist camp meetings. She calls the meetings “a great evil, a sore affliction in the land, a pestilence walking in darkness” (Williams 164). There is, however, a great deal of prejudice in her assessment. She worries as much about fanaticism as “the motley assembly” present at Camp Meetings where there is “free intermingling of society” (Williams 165–66). The purpose of the meetings, and the reason they’re held outdoors, she acknowledges, is “to call sinners to repentance,” but she suggests that there should be “a place assigned [the sinners], where they may hear and be profited by the preaching of the word—and kept in sight that people may know what they are about” (Williams 166). We thus have to read Cornell’s criticisms of Methodists and their camp meetings with a grain of salt.

While we don’t know much about Sarah Cornell’s particular experience with Methodism and camp meetings, we do have the journals of Rachel Stearns, another unmarried Massachusetts woman and Methodist who was ten years younger than Cornell. In a survey of Stearns’ “spiritual pilgrimage” from 1834-1837, Candy Gunther details Stearns’ conversion to Methodism as described in Stearns’ journals. Gunther argues, “the journals of Rachel Stearns offer us a road inward to the texture and meaning of women’s religious experiences in nineteenth-century America…a world in which the ‘social’ and the ‘religious’ intermingled in a tense, and at times explosive, milieu” (Gunther 578). More specifically, Gunther writes, “Rachel Stearns pilgrimage offers insights into women’s experiences in the Methodist revivals of the first half of the
nineteenth century” (Gunther 595). Gunther notes that, among the upper class, the reputation of Methodists was such that “it would not have been ‘respectable’ for a young lady to attend a Methodist meeting” (Gunther 580), and she goes to great lengths to show the social isolation that Stearns experienced after her conversion. Ultimately, however, for Stearns “seeking outward respectability conflicted with inward obedience to God” (Gunther 581). Among the reasons that Methodism was viewed as less respectable, and this is certainly the case for Williams as well, was the fact that “new rules for speech and behavior prevailed within the meeting house…men and women spoke, prayed, sang, and ‘shouted,’ individually and together” (Gunther 585). Indeed, Methodism “affirmed an egalitarian bond between brothers and sisters in the family of God.” Thus, “behavior unacceptable outside the meetinghouse seemed appropriate and natural to the place and time” (Gunther 585). Meetings were held on Sundays as well as throughout the week, and camp meetings occurred regularly and could last several days and nights. At these meetings, according to Gunther, “people heard preaching, sang hymns, attended prayer meetings, shared love feasts, testified to God’s work in their lives, and sought the blessings of justification and sanctification” (Gunther 588). Gunther writes that “religion shaped not only Stearn’s work but her social interactions…shared spiritual experiences mattered more than the ‘bonds of womanhood’ in shaping her social network” (Gunther 592). Interestingly, though Stearns at times expressed satisfaction with her unmarried status, in her journals she “confessed her secret dream of becoming the ‘wife of a Methodist minister’” (Gunther 592). While we don’t know if Cornell, too, harbored this “secret dream,” we do know that she had an affair with the Methodist minister Ephraim Avery. In Williams’ conception, Cornell is the victim of Reverend Avery, who took
advantage of his position and benefitted from the religious fervor that Stearns describes in her journals, and that Williams condemns.

Beyond being a victim, however, in the pages of *Fall River* and throughout the narrative of the murder, trial, and Cornell’s life story and letters, the person of Sarah Cornell is rendered in full. As the subtitle of *Fall River* indicates, Williams wishes to offer “an authentic narrative,” and to that end she concludes her preface by writing:

With respect to embellishment in this book, no person acquainted with the facts, who has seen it, pretends to say there is any, except in the first interview between the physician and the unfortunate heroine of the tale; where it is said the phraseology is improved without altering the facts. If the error is on the side of delicacy we hope to be pardoned. (Williams viii)

In its aim for veracity, *Fall River* embodies many of the hallmarks that have come to define sentimental literature. First, it operates in the mode of the “female complaint,” which Lauren Berlant defines as “an international mode of public discourse that demonstrates women’s contested value in the patriarchal public sphere by providing commentary from a generically ‘feminine’ point of view” (Berlant 433). Additionally, *Fall River* offers outward expressions of inner feelings in its characterizations particularly of Sarah Cornell, and it employs objects as embodiments of human connection. These features work together toward the aim of brandishing sentiment against sensation: the shift from caricature to character, from feelings of shock and rage to empathy and understanding.

Berlant describes the female complaint as “an aesthetic ‘witnessing’ of injury” (Berlant 433). Her particular subject is Fanny Fern’s columns and novels, but the female complaint is
indeed a fixture of nineteenth century writing and it is the essence of what Catherine Williams hopes to accomplish in *Fall River*. Williams’ “authentic narrative” is a corrective to the masculinized court reports and sensational reporting that had previously told the story of Sarah Cornell’s murder. Williams writes, “public indignation could not wait with patience for the issue of the trial, and from time to time it would speak out through the medium of the papers” (Williams 47). Once the trial began and after it concluded, the consensus among residents of Fall River was that Cornell’s murderer, Ephraim Avery was guilty, and yet Sarah Cornell, in the popular imagination, shared part of the guilt. In fact, though it was Avery who was arraigned, Williams notes that it was often Cornell’s character that was on trial; Williams even refers to it as “the famous trial of S. M. Cornell” (Williams 79). The published trial proceedings featured a number of testimonies against Cornell’s character, “a great deal of it was entirely irrelevant to the case; a vast deal appeared to have no object but to black the character of one…who was ‘where she could not answer them back again’” according to Williams (Williams 152). “It had the certain tendency,” writes Williams, “to turn the public indignation from the murderer, whoever he might be, to the person murdered” (Williams 60). Cornell was painted as “utterly bad” and possibly insane. Not only was Cornell’s character sullied, but Williams notes “the great injury and injustice which the publication of the life and character of Sarah M. Cornell, has done to that class of young women whose lot in life has compelled them to labor in a manufactory” (Williams 196). Cornell was reduced to an archetype—the factory girl—and as such she was easily denigrated, and along with her a whole class of women who worked in factories.
Williams’ account, on the other hand, operates from a place of “charity” as she describes it; her efforts humanize Cornell. Toward the end of her narrative, she writes, “the murdered, mangled remains of Sarah Maria Cornell still repose at Fall River, at rest we hope, from all further molestation.” The grave site, Williams adds, was visited by people from all over the country and “few have visited that spot without tears…It is the grave of a poor factory girl, but from that grave a voice seems to issue, noiseless as that still small one, that speaks to the conscience of the sinner, but who’s tone nevertheless sinks deep into the heart” (Williams 71–72). Williams describes visiting the grave site herself on an evening marked by a lunar eclipse; she writes, “I watched it as the shadow slid from the moon’s disk, and I felt that confidence which I have ever felt since, that the mystery of darkness which envelopes the story and hides the sad fate of that unfortunate victim will one day be dispersed” (Williams 72). Indeed, Williams’ account is an effort to disperse the mystery of darkness, to witness the injury of Sarah Cornell, and to correct the sensationalized narrative that sullied her character.

Another hallmark of sentimental writing is the outward expression of inner feelings of characters, and Fall River is full of such characterizations. Karen Halttunen, in describing accounts of another murder trial—that of Lucretia Chapman in 1831—notes an “emotionally inflated rhetoric that made reference whenever possible to the feelings of their various characters” as among the conventions of sentimental writing (Halttunen 44). Indeed, when we first meet Cornell, through the eyes of the unnamed doctor, “her countenance bespoke the possession of beauty in happier days—but it was now clouded with care and shaded with grief.” She wears an “air of extreme dejection” and the doctor “never saw her without her shedding tears
and betraying most painful feelings with respect to her situation” (Williams 25). The doctor, himself, frequently cries when thinking about the case of Cornell, and is woken in the middle of the night by visions of Cornell’s corpse, which he describes upon seeing, “her countenance was exceedingly distorted, and there was not only an expression of anguish upon it, but one of horror and affright, combined with an angry frown” (Williams 28). Even the judges, “though used to the delineation of crime, and pictures of violence, wept upon the bench; yea wept like children, at the description of her mangled person” (Williams 50). These descriptions of outward expressions of the inner feelings of the characters—from Cornell, to the doctor, to the judge—have the effect of humanizing them, and evoking fellow feeling among readers who presumably cry along with the characters in the story.

Cornell’s religious fervor, which Williams’ suggests is in part responsible for her death, is likewise described as an outward expression of Cornell’s inner character. Williams writes that Cornell’s religion was one of “feelings and frames.” It was sincere, says Williams, “yet it was of that unstable kind that is most apt to fail when most needed.” She sustained her religious fervor by attending “exciting meetings where highly wrought feeling and sometimes hysterical affection is often mistaken for devotion” (Williams 85). These descriptions serve to paint a dualistic picture of Cornell’s inner religious life. On the one hand, she was a person of faith, which Williams lauds, but that her religious devotion was marked by “highly wrought feeling” and “hysterical affection” made her a prime target for the Methodist minister Avery. Outward expression of inner character can be good, then, but it can also be misplaced and in this
misplacement can leave one vulnerable to attack. Williams invites readers to cry along with Cornell, while simultaneously warning them away from hysterical religion.

Finally, another convention of sentimental writing that Williams employs in her account of Sarah Cornell is the use of what Joanne Dobson calls the “sentimental keepsake,” which “constitutes a vivid symbolic embodiment of the primacy of human connection and the inevitability of human loss” (Dobson 273). Dobson’s subject is Eva’s curls, “the keepsakes by which she wishes to be remembered,” in Uncle Tom’s Cabin, but the sentimental keepsake appears in many works of sentimental writing in the nineteenth century. Lynn Wardley traces this motif to the “belief that some spirit inhabits all things,” and notes “it is by 1852 one familiar element of the nineteenth-century domestic ideology” (Wardley 205). In Fall River, we are presented with many sentimental keepsakes, a broken comb—a piece of which is found near where Cornell was murdered and matched to its other half still in Cornell’s hair—Cornell’s pocket handkerchief, and most significantly the letters she left behind and that Williams reprints in full in Fall River. Each of these constitute a “symbolic embodiment” of human connection, as Dobson writes. The broken comb represents Cornell’s own broken body, as well as broken relationship with Avery. The pocket handkerchief, “found near [Cornell] wound up in a hard bunch and wet through and through,” with Cornell’s saliva was used to “stop her mouth by some person who murdered her,” according to Williams (Williams 33). Thus the handkerchief was taken from Cornell and used by Avery for the very purpose of silencing her, but in the end the handkerchief itself speaks against Avery. Finally, Cornell’s letters similarly work as evidence as well as sentimental keepsakes.
For Williams, Cornell’s letters serve a number of purposes, the least of which is not to flesh out Cornell’s character by allowing her to express herself in her own words. But, beyond the content of the letters, they also serve as sentimental keepsakes, embodiments of Cornell’s connection to her friends and family as well as with readers, and a reminder of her lost life. Cornell’s letters played a significant role in the trial of Avery, and it is here where their physicality was just as significant as the messages they contained. The color of the paper on which the letters were written as well as the handwriting are significant—Avery wrote three letters to Cornell on white, yellow, and pink paper, the white and yellow letters were written in his own handwriting and the pink was written in a disguised handwriting meant to resemble that of a woman. Williams was granted access to the letters, which were in the custody of the court, and examined the handwriting to ascertain the truth as to whether Cornell might have forged them in an effort to frame Avery for her suicide, as his defense argued. Williams writes, “Among the papers found in her possession we discovered nothing in her hand, however, except her letter to Mr. Bidwell, and the slip of paper containing those words—‘If I am missing,’ &c.” (Williams 155). This last letter, the one written by Cornell, is most significant both as evidence and as a sentimental keepsake. Found among her possessions after her death, Cornell wrote on a scrap of paper described as “very small, soiled and looking like waste paper,” “If I am missing enquire of the Rev. E. K. Avery. S. M. C.” (Williams 31). These were among the last words Cornell would write and serve to illustrate the sense of danger she must have felt. Williams calls this “a presentiment of evil,” and this little slip of paper on which it was written comes up several times in Williams’ account. Wardley notes that sentimental keepsakes are often “linked to the mortal
bodies of their original owners” and that in sentimental literature they “display the properties of sacred relics” (Wardley 207). Cornell’s last letter certainly serves this purpose in Williams’ narrative.

Williams ends her account of the trial with an entreaty to readers to not continue the rioting and harassment of Avery that followed the not guilty verdict in the trial. Williams writes, “In conclusion, we would observe, that however strong the presumption of the guilt of E. K. Avery may be on the public mind, we fervently hope he may remain unmolested, and we would wish unnoticed. If he is guilty, the avenger of blood is behind him. That is sufficient. If innocent, he ought not to preach. Still, silent contempt and utter neglect would do more towards putting down such persons than clamour” (Williams 157–58). *Fall River* is without question a sentimental work, but it is never sensational. It employs *sentiment against sensation* in an effort to help readers understand the woman at the center of the story, Sarah Cornell. Elsewhere, as we’ve seen, sensational writing sought to reduce Cornell from a real person, and indeed a victim of a brutal murder, to a caricature, a fallen woman and a cautionary tale. Not so for Williams’ account. In this way, *Fall River* fulfills the role that countless examples of literary journalism fill in the centuries that followed. Thus, in its claim of veracity, its use of reporting and original sources, and its effort to tell the story behind salacious headlines, *Fall River* is among the earliest examples of what has come to be known as literary journalism, as well as a primary example of a strong tradition of women writers correcting sensationalized narratives about other women. This tradition reached its popular apotheosis in the early decades of the twentieth century, in the form of the so-called “sob sisters.”
The So-Called "Sob Sisters"

By the dawn of the twentieth century, momentum was moving in favor of women in journalism. As we’ve seen, the stage was set by writers like Margaret Fuller in the mid-nineteenth century, followed by other trailblazers like Fanny Fern and Nell Nelson, and then by the fin de siècle with the rise of the so-called “stunt girls,” women began to enter the field en masse. Agnes Hooper Gottlieb writes in her survey of women in journalism from 1850-1926, “by 1900, the U.S. Census reported that 2,193 women defined their occupations as journalists” up from just 35 in 1870 (Gottlieb 54). Still, as Gottlieb notes, women who wished to enter the male-dominated newsroom encountered an often hostile environment where sexual exploitation and harassment were common. Further, whereas many women who sought journalism careers were inspired by fictional accounts of intrepid journalists as well as the actual work of stunt journalists, Gottlieb writes, “women who thought they would be writing front page news stories were relegated to the women’s sections” (Gottlieb 56). While still a novelty at the beginning of the twentieth century, women had entered the mainstream of newspaper reporting.

By all accounts, then, 1907 should represent the culmination of this long migration by women into journalism, as it was in January of 1907 that women reporters, for the first time, were granted access to a courtroom to report on a major murder trial. The previous June, Harry Kendall Thaw, heir to a multi-million dollar fortune, shot and killed Stanford White, a renowned architect, and the trial was set for January of 1907. Thaw’s wife Evelyn Nesbit, a famous model and chorus girl, had confided in Thaw that White had sexually assaulted her when she was
younger. This revelation deeply troubled Thaw, who had a history of mental illness, and when he saw White during a performance of *Mam’zelle Champagne* playing on the rooftop theater of Madison Square Garden (which White had designed), Thaw approached White from behind and shot him in the back at close range. Though the century was only eight years old, the Thaw trial was declared “the trial of the century,” the first time this now overused bit of hyperbole had been employed. Irvin S. Cobb, who covered the trial—and who will become even more significant in a moment—described the trial thusly:

> You see, it had in it wealth, degeneracy, rich old wasters, delectable young chorus girls and adolescent artists’ models; the behind-the-scenes of Theatredom and the Underworld, and the Great White Way…the abnormal pastimes and weird orgies of overly aesthetic artists and jaded debauchees. In the cast of the motley show were Bowery toughs, Harlem gangsters, Tenderloin panderers, Broadway leading men, Fifth Avenue clubmen, Wall Street manipulators, uptown voluptuaries and downtown thugs. (Peter Carlson)

But above all this, at the center of the trial was Nesbit⁶, who tirelessly defended her husband throughout. Nesbit became the sympathetic focal point of the trial, and to satisfy the public’s fascination with Nesbit, four major New York daily newspapers took the unprecedented step of assigning female reporters to cover the trial from within the courtroom.

The four women were Dorothy Dix, Nixola Greeley-Smith, Ada Patterson, and Winifred Black, also known as Annie Laurie. They were assigned a special table set apart from the other reporters and, as Ishbel Ross writes in her 1936 book *Ladies of the Press: The Story of Women in Journalism by an Insider*, “their function was to watch for the tear-filled eye, the widow’s veil,

---

⁶ Reporters covering the trial at times refer to Evelyn Nesbit Thaw by her maiden name, Nesibt, while other times she is called “Mrs. Thaw.” For clarity, and to distinguish her from her husband, I use her maiden name Nesbit.
the quivering lip, the lump in the throat, the trembling hand.” Ross adds, “They did it very well” (Ross). The articles that the women wrote were very popular, breaking through another journalistic norm by being accompanied not only by a by-line—still relatively unusual for the time—but also often the writer’s name in the headline and an accompanying photograph of the writer. This accolade, along with the unprecedented access afforded the four journalists, might have marked the beginning of a new era for women in journalism, but that is not how it turned out. Instead, the women were dismissed by the journalistic establishment and stricken with such labels as the “pity platoon,” “sympathy squad,” “female railbirds,” “lady muckrakers,” as well as the one that would stick, “sob sisters.” Jean Marie Lutes writes, “in the space of three syllables, ‘sob sister’ recast trailblazing professionals as gullible amateurs” (Lutes 66). Ishbel Ross identifies Irvin S. Cobb as the originator of the term “sob sister,” calling him a “cynical colleague.” Ross writes that Cobb, “looking a little wearily at the four fine-looking girls who spread their sympathy like jam, injected a scornful line into his copy about the ‘sob sisters.’” Ross continues, “this was the origin of the phrase that in time became the hallmark of the girl reporter” (Ross 65). Thus, what might’ve represented a major break through for women in journalism, instead led to a decades-long backlash.

As a result, the writing of the “sob sisters” is relegated to the trash bin of overwrought, sensational reporting, but to the extent that they wrote to invoke tears, as they were accused of and indeed named for, tears signify fellow-feeling—sentiment not sensation. The “sob sisters” make for a fascinating case study into the importance of distinguishing between sentimental and sensational writing. They wrote in a sentimental style, no doubt. But the dismissive term “sob
“sister” implies something more than writing to evoke tears. Indeed, embedded in the term is an accusation that the women who covered the Thaw trial wrote with the intention of manipulating readers’ emotions and profiting off of their manipulations. As we’ve seen, this kind of manipulation is the hallmark of sensationalism, describing sensational events but not participating in them in order to evoke strong reactions from readers. If anything, the “sob sisters” can be accused of writing in asentimental style that the rapidly changing press had come to consider obsolete, but, as we’ve seen, is an enduring mode with a long history in the nineteenth century. Consider, for example, Dorothy Dix’s description of Evelyn Nesbit, “In good truth, a more piteous figure than the little chorus girl and artists’ muse could scarcely be imagined…She came into the court looking like a flower that has been beaten down into the ground and despoiled of its beauty by storm” (Dix, “Evelyn’s Life Story Must Save or Slay Man She Enchanted”). It is a sentimental rendering, yes, foregrounding the outer expression of inner feelings, but it is hardly sensational. Dix’s sympathies are with Nesbit; readers are meant to feel for Nesbit, not gawk at her. Nixola Greeley-Smith, in her description of the testimony of Nesbit regarding her rape by White—indeed the most emotionally fraught moment in the trial—is perhaps more evocative, comparing it to torture: “Here was a vivisection of a woman’s soul, the tearing from it of its profoundest secrets, a rending, wrenching, merciless diggings into its depths that by comparison made the rack seem less hideous and awful” (Greeley-Smith). But indeed, the cross examination was extremely difficult, “Before an audience of many hundred men young Mrs. Thaw was compelled to reveal in all its hideousness every detail of her association with
Stanford White after his crime against her. Not once but many times. Over and over and over again came the revolution questions, the same trembling, piteous answers” (Greeley-Smith).

The “sob sisters” were doing more than evoking tears; working in the sentimental tradition they were simultaneously advocating on behalf of women. Consider Dix’s reflection on the lack of women on the jury7, “I think that a jury of women would be both more merciful and less merciful to Thaw than a jury of men.” Dix continues, “a woman jury would want to know only two things. They would want to be shown first that after Evelyn married Thaw that she was trying to live decently and honesty, and that she had put the past behind her. Then they would want to know if White molested her in her new life.” She concludes, “If a woman jury acquitted Thaw—and I think it would—it would do so on its emotions. Whether it would be more emotional than a man jury we cannot tell—until we hear the verdict of the man jury” (Dix, “If Thaw Were Tried By Jury of Women! Verdict---Not Guilty!”). Greeley-Smith, after recounting Nesbit’s harrowing testimony notes that despite her tears, the prosecutor did not break her, “Through tears that rained down her pallid cheeks, through sobs that shook her slender body…the story of wrong Evelyn Thaw told her husband’s jury emerges, strong and untouched in its essential facts as on the day she uttered it” (Greeley-Smith). There is a difference between sensationalizing—or manipulating readers emotions through evocative language—and writing in a sentimental mode. But the pervasive dismissal of Dix, Greeley-Smith, Ada Patterson, and Winifred Black (who I will consider further in the next section) as “sob sisters” is the result of a conflation of sentimental writing and sensational reporting that frames the motivation behind

7 Women weren’t allowed to serve on a jury in New York until 1937.
their journalism as manipulative and opportunistic. By its very nature the alliterative, catchy quality of the label implies something trite and easily dismissed—it is, like so many subjects of sensational reporting, reductive. But as the “sob sisters” often wrote against the reductive caricaturing or scandalizing of the sensational press—employing sentiment against sensation—likewise my efforts here are directed toward a more nuanced reading of the so-called “sob sisters”, and in particular Winifred Black, who eschewed the label literally to her dying day. Black and the others injected the Thaw trial with a human element otherwise obscured by the sensational reporting around “the trial of the century.” In short, their writing is emblematic of women literary journalists writing in the sentimental mode to bridge the gap between subjectivities of subject and reader created by sensational reporting.

Winifred Black and "The Trial of the Century"

Winifred Black, who also wrote under the pen name Annie Laurie, had been working as a full time journalist for 18 years by 1907. And yet, when her name appears in the literature of journalism history, it is most often in the context of the women who covered the Harry Thaw trial. That is, when she is remembered at all, it is as a “sob sister.” Black, herself, seemed to anticipate this legacy. Her obituary in The New York Times, published on May 26, 1936, the day after she died, includes only one quote from Black: “I am not a ‘sob sister’ or a ‘special writer’…I’m just a plain, practical all-around newspaper woman. That’s my profession, and that is my pride. I’d rather smell the printers’ ink and hear the presses go round than go to any grand opera in the world” (“WINIFRED BLACK, 73, JOURNALIST, DEAD”). Nevertheless, the sob
sister label stuck. Though, as I’ve argued, all of the so-called “sob sisters” were unfairly labeled and thus summarily dismissed, this injustice is even greater in the case of Black, whose writing—about the Thaw trial or anything else—is sentimental, but never sensational.

In *Winifred Black/Annie Laurie and the Making of Modern Nonfiction*, the only book-length treatment of Black written to date, Katherine H. Adams and Michael L. Keene note that Black only wrote eleven articles about the Thaw trial, far fewer than her colleagues, and “within this small total, certainly not every article concerned Nesbit” (Adams and Keene 57). Indeed, Adams and Keene convincingly frame Black as an early practitioner of modern nonfiction; they write, “Black made a huge contribution to the development of nonfiction long before Joan Didion, Truman Capote, Tom Wolfe, David Foster Wallace, Malcom Gladwell, and Chuck Klosterman” (Adams and Keene 6). Thus, they situate her in the lineage of literary journalism in terms of both style and content: “she applied the nonfiction techniques with which she experimented to the realities facing modern women: the work they did, their marriages and divorces, the violence they endured, their need for freedom” (Adams and Keene 6–8). In her 47-year career as a journalist, Black worked tirelessly to narrow the gap between the subjectivities of her readers and her subjects, and often brandished sentiment against sensationalism as a means to do so.

In an article titled “When a Man’s a Fool,” published days after Thaw murdered White, Black’s target is Thaw, but her subject is Evelyn Nesbit. The headline declares that Thaw is fool, but not just a fool; the article’s lede reads, “Poor, foolish, big-hearted, scatter-witted, kindly, what-could-you-expect, Harry Thaw?” Black goes on to write, “He’s more a man, bad as he is,
than either his friends or his enemies, if he had any, poor fool, gave him credit for.” Black pities Thaw for marrying “a woman with a record,” which initially gives the impression that Black will blame Nesbit for her husband’s actions, but not so. In fact, Black leaves Thaw and Nesbit altogether for several paragraphs. Instead, she tells a domestic tale—a story from her childhood of another “poor fool of a love-sick boy” who murdered his parents in cold blood, saying to his “scarlet woman,” “I guess they won’t talk about you any more, Marie.” The next day was Sunday, Black writes, and at church the minister took the opportunity to address the murder. “He quoted the Bible verse about the Scarlet Woman,” Black writes, “and we girls didn’t dare even look at each other.” She continues, “We thought it was a terrible thing for the minister to do that. He stood there and told us what such women meant and what their influence on the lives of every human being who came anywhere near them meant.” Thus, the minister that Black remembers from her youth, not Black herself, focuses the blame on the “scarlet woman.” And yet, Black writes, “Perhaps if Harry Thaw had heard [the sermon], he would have looked somewhere else for a wife” (Winifred Black, “When a Man’s a Fool”).

At this point in the piece, Black pivots once again, away from the childhood tragedy and to Evelyn Nesbit herself: “She was an artist’s model, this woman that he married; the papers are all so careful to tell us that in romantic headlines.” It has been only three days since the murder took place, and already, Black tells us, Nesbit has been romanticized. But Black’s aim is to disabuse readers of that notion; she writes, “There is nothing very romantic about an artist’s model, or the life that an artist’s model leads.” Over the course of the next several paragraphs, Black paints a more accurate—albeit fictionalized—picture of the life of an artist’s model,
including living with three roommates in a small flat in Harlem, cooking frankfurters in a dirty pan over a gas stove, drinking beer from a cracked water pitcher, and avoiding a dunning landlord. “An artist’s model’s life is just about as romantic as a cook’s or a saleslady’s,” Black writes. “When an artist’s model is a good woman she lives as other good women who work for a living have to live—poorly, and with little grace. When she isn’t a good woman—that is quite a different story.” But even when she isn’t good, Black insists, there’s still no romance to her life. “Sin is so glittering and so alluring and so fascinating—when you read about it,” Black writes calling out the sensational press. “In real life it’s just about as alluring as a sink full of unwashed dishes in a pantry where there’s a hole in the screen that the flies have found” (Winifred Black, “When a Man’s a Fool”). To conclude her article Black turns back to Harry Thaw. “If Harry Thaw had been thin-skinned enough not to marry a woman with a record, or thick-skinned enough not to care about the record when he married her, her name wouldn’t be on the front page of every newspaper in the country with the word ‘murder’ today” (Winifred Black, “When a Man’s a Fool”). Interestingly, and obviously intentionally, Evelyn Nesbit’s name never appears in Black’s article, though Nesbit is very much the focus.

This piece is characteristic of Black’s writing. She writes forcefully, but surprisingly. The reader is unsure for most of the article of the point she is driving at until she finally drives it home. Likewise, she can mix pity for Thaw with an almost emotionless account of Nesbit. This, in particular, stands in strong contrast to the expectation of Black as a sob sister, as “sob sisters” were meant to fawn over Nesbit, evoking tears on her behalf. But for Black, Nesbit is neither victim nor villain, she is—over and again—described as an artist’s model, living a rather
nonromantic artist’s model’s life. Black tells the story from her childhood to indicate that even a young girl, as she was when she heard the minister decry the “scarlet woman,” can see that it is “a terrible thing” to blame a woman for her man’s actions. This is the “female complaint” in the sentimental mode; Black will not let Nesbit be reduced to a caricature, and she won’t allow Nesbit to be blamed for Thaw’s decision to murder Stanford White. And yet Black clearly pities Thaw. Her pity, though, revolves around her opinion that he simply didn’t know what he was getting into. Black concludes the article, “He began to play the game a few little years ago; it’s rather soon for the dealer to get round to him, isn’t it?” (Winifred Black, “When a Man’s a Fool”). There is no sensation here; for Black, Thaw’s story is simply one of “a poor fool of a love-sick boy” who fell for “a woman with a record,” and Thaw’s decision to murder Stanford White is the result of Thaw’s own foolishness.

The above article was published on June 28, 1906, three days after the murder was committed, and Black, like most of the country, remained riveted by the trials that followed. Thaw was tried twice as the first trial ended in deadlock. At the end of the second trial, Thaw was found not guilty by reason of insanity and was issued a life sentence at Matteawan State Hospital for the Criminally Insane in Fishkill, New York. But by February 10, 1907, midway through the first trial and after a few days of hearing Evelyn Nesbit’s testimony, Black, like her colleagues, had seemed to have already made up her mind regarding Thaw’s innocence. In an article titled “One Woman’s View,” Black writes:

If I had a husband on that jury in the Thaw case and he came home when the trial was done and told me that he had voted to send Harry Thaw to the electric chair after hearing
Evelyn Nesbit’s story on the stand Wednesday and Harry Thaw’s letters read in court yesterday, I would sue him for divorce if I had to crawl to South Dakota on my hands and knees to file the papers. (Winifred Black, “One Woman’s View”)

According to reporting in The New York Times, on February 7 Nesbit told “the whole story of her life, and her relations with White” (“Evelyn Thaw Tells Her Story”). Nesbit told of an invitation from White to a party at his studio, but when she arrived, they were alone. White suggested they have dinner together and that others would be along. Later he offered her a tour of the studio, which ended in a bedroom where White insisted she drink a glass of champagne. After that, according to Nesbit, she passed out and woke up the next morning in bed. The Times coverage of Nesbit’s testimony takes care to note “there were women in the courtroom,” and that Nesbit’s story “caused them to bow their heads and hide their faces.”

It is clear that Nesbit’s testimony resonated with Black, evoking the kind of fellow-feeling that the best sentimental writing is capable of. On hearing the testimony, Black writes, “I felt as I did once when I was stumbling across a country bridge on a dark night, and a sudden flash of lightning showed me the black and terrifying torrent of cruel water eddying almost under my very feet.” She continues, “We walk so safely on the bridge built for us by loving hands, we sheltered women. How little, oh, how blessedly little, we know of the awful torrents that rush below our calm security” (Winifred Black, “One Woman’s View”). Nesbit’s testimony proffered a moment of collective awakening for the newspaperwomen in the courtroom. They had been hired by their various papers for this very reason, to identify with Nesbit, to write the female complaint. And, as Lutes writes, “By identifying with Evelyn, the “sob sisters” turned their assumed womanly weakness, particularly emotional vulnerability, into an asset” (Lutes 80). In
this way, with her sentimental but not sensational treatment of Nesbit’s testimony, Black extended the fellow-feeling between Nesbit and the newspaperwomen beyond the courtroom to include the countless women that would read her account and those of the other “sob sisters.” Black doesn’t say any more about Nesbit’s testimony, but, according to the Times, Nesbit, who was “dressed as a child” and spoke with a “girlish lisp,” “never once lost control of herself.” Meanwhile, Harry Thaw wept audibly: “His face was hidden, but the broad shoulders twitched. Those near him could hear great gulping sounds as he fought to master his emotion” (“Evelyn Thaw Tells Her Story”). It is interesting to note that these sobbing details were omitted from at least one sob sister’s account.

In addition to Nesbit’s spoken testimony, letters that Thaw wrote to Nesbit and to his lawyer were read aloud in the court. The Washington Post describes the letters as “often incoherent,” but notes “one makes up one’s mind that they are little better than ravings and then one stumbles suddenly upon some sentence or phrase that rings true with a deep and genuine emotion, of sorrow, or of love, deep and true” (“Jerome Will Risk All”). Indeed these letters, like Nesbit’s testimony, had a great impact on Black. She writes, “When I heard Harry Thaw’s letters read in court yesterday it was like finding in some noisome swamp a pure sheaf of fragrant blossoms, growing sweet and comforting like a smile on the plain face of one who loves us, in the dirt and desolation” (Winifred Black, “One Woman’s View”). As before, Black’s treatment of Thaw himself is, at best, pitying. She describes him as “a great, big, overgrown, clumsy, broad-faced, slow-witted, big-eyed boy of a fellow, brought up to nothing but the most selfish egotism and blind self-indulgence.” And yet, she doesn’t for a moment doubt his love for Nesbit.
Black writes that as the letters were read, Thaw “sat leaning forward in his chair, with his big, stupid, faithful, loving eyes fixed full on the face of his pale, little wife.” Black reads in Thaw’s gaze a reassurance that he still loves Nesbit as he wrote in his letters. For her part, Black believes him. Even in the context of a murder trial, she sees in Thaw’s letters a “sweet, old-fashioned, foolish story” (Winifred Black, “One Woman’s View”). Recall how Sarah Cornell’s letters functioned both as evidence in Avery’s trial and as sentimental keepsakes—displaying “the properties of sacred relics”—in Williams’ account of Cornell’s life. Thaw’s letters are presented by Black in much the same way.

By employing sentiment against sensation, Black manages to create fellow feeling between her readers and her subjects—Nesbit most often, but Thaw as well. Lutes notes that, after the Thaw trial, “the newswomen achieved status as proponents of sentimentalism in an increasingly heterogeneous and fragmented modern world” (Lutes 93). Being proponents of sentimentalism, however came at a cost. In some ways, sentimentalism never made it out of the nineteenth century. That is, even by the first decade of the twentieth century, and increasingly more so as the century went on, sentimentalism would come to be seen as “a synonym for shallow and trite,” according to Lutes (Lutes 66). Ultimately, Lutes concludes, the “sob sisters” “wrote themselves into national prominence even as they wrote themselves out of literary history” (Lutes 93). Indeed, this includes the history of literary journalism. Winifred Black is largely forgotten today and has never been considered a forbearer of literary journalism precisely because sentimentalism has so fallen out of favor among scholars of literature. It follows, then, that if scholars of literary journalism were to embrace the genre’s sentimental roots, it would
further destabilize the already tenuous place of literary journalism in the academy, perhaps
damning it to permanent non-literary status.

But as Jane Tompkins convincingly argues, and as I affirm here, if we read literature in
light of its cultural work, not only do we affirm the place of sentimental writing to evoke fellow-
feeling and close the gap between the subjectivities of readers, writers, and their subjects, but we
must also acknowledge that the sentimental strain remains a strong and important component of
literary journalism. Lutes writes that the brief popularity of sob sister journalism in the early
twentieth century represents “a newly secularized nation reimagining sentimentalism through a
strikingly modern mass-media spectacle.” She attributes this to “American popular culture’s
refusal to relinquish the consolations of the sentimental” (Lutes 68). This sentimental strain is so
strong, I argue, that though the “sob sisters” faded into obscurity, sentimental literary journalism
outlived them, into the twentieth century and beyond.

A New Kind of Historical Criticism

While sensationalism and sentimentalism both thrived in the periodical press of the
nineteenth century and are most readily associated with that era, they continued into the
twentieth century, and remain with us today. Indeed, their relationship is as complicated now as it
ever was. They both operate on an emotional level, and yet the emotions they trigger and the way
they impact how we relate to others could not be more different. Sensationalism aims to shock
and repulse, it operates by making us vividly aware of the otherness of others. Sentimentalism,
on the other hand, evokes sympathy and fellow-feeling, prompting us to see ourselves in others.
Sensationalism dehumanizes, sentimentalism humanizes. Additionally, because they have been fixtures in the American media for so long, the forms they take have shifted. We may most readily think of sensationalism in the press as marked by bold and salacious headlines, scandalous pictures, and over-the-top writing, but that is just one kind of sensationalism. It also exists in the paradoxical sensationalizing power of so-called objective journalism that has dominated for the past century. Beyond the nineteenth century, sensationalism continued as a kind of mediated epistemology—one that necessarily reduces complex subjects to caricatures. Sari Edelstein, in her reading of the work of Edith Eaton suggests that Eaton saw “the shift toward objectivity [as] simply sensationalism by another name.” Edelstein continues that for Eaton, “the emphasis on objective or ‘value-free’ reportage, merely veils the spectacular and ideological nature of race-based exposés and investigative reports” (Edelstein 144). That is, objective journalism is a facade meant to mask the motivations and biases of the human actors who write the stories. Further, in service of the ideal of objectivity, the subjects of stories are dehumanized, reduced to factors in a mathematical equation meant to represent reality. Whereas sensational reporting caricatures and stereotypes as a means of accessing a shared sense of reality, objective reporting attempts to remove the human element through self-negation in an attempt to reach an imagined unbiased clarity. Likewise, sentimental writing is much changed since the nineteenth century. Though it is still associated with overly embellished language, that is less a feature of sentimentalism than of its contemporaneous nineteenth century literary cousin romanticism. But, as sentimentalism and sensationalism are not the same, neither are sentimentalism and romanticism. To the extent that writers continued to evoke fellow-feeling in
their readers, to narrow the gap between the subjectivities of readers and subjects, sentimentalism has continued through the twentieth century and to today. The style of literature took a turn toward more stark, realist prose and poetry, but sentimentalism is robust enough to thrive in those environments just as it thrived in the era of the romantics.

As Jane Tompkins has shown, when we consider literature in terms of its cultural work, when we see “literary texts not as works of art embodying enduring themes in complex forms, but as attempts to redefine the social order” (Tompkins, Sensational Designs xi), we can dispense with biases against a particular style for the sake of the style and instead turn our attention to what impact a text had on culture. This is, as Tompkins writes, “a new kind of historical criticism” (Tompkins, Sensational Designs xiii), but it is one that is worth exploring as it allows us to see literary history at much greater scales. We can see, as I’ve been arguing, how sentimentalism has long worked against sensationalism in all its forms. We can see how women writers and reporters have been marginalized through presentist criticism that favors this or that particular literary style. And we can see how literary journalism, a genre that grew up alongside what we now so hastily call simply literature, has had a tremendous cultural impact in working against overly simplified mainstream narratives.

It is unfair and indeed undesirable to expect that writers and their texts should transcend their time. We know, instinctively, that writers write, rather, to have influence and make an impact in their time. Rather let us look back to Catherine Williams, writing in the 1830s in an attempt to correct a narrative that unjustly convicted an innocent woman of her own killing. We can see in Williams’ book the immediate impact she meant to have on an important cultural
moment, but beyond that we see Williams as part of a long-standing literary tradition of using sentiment against sensation. Likewise, Winifred Black, the “sob sister,” who by very nature of carrying that label into history has been denigrated as an emotional opportunist, when seen as part of this continuum merits a closer look. In her own literary moment, Black showed what women could contribute to the American press, even if the press wasn’t yet ready for women’s contributions. And indeed, the project she took up, to restore a sense of humanity in an overly sensationalized media environment, as well as the obstructions she faced, continue today.
CHAPTER 3: ZORA NEALE HURSTON AND JOAN DIDION WRITING AGAINST RACIALIZED MASTER NARRATIVES

In the summer of 1952, in the small town of Live Oak, Florida, an African American woman named Ruby J. McCollum shot and killed her white doctor after a dispute over an unpaid medical bill. She claimed they were lovers, but the doctor was a pillar of his community, respected by all, and thus her claims were dismissed. The doctor’s murder by a black woman caused a tremendous furor in Live Oak and beyond. McCollum was arrested in her home, tried, and convicted of the murder. She was sentenced to death by electric chair. Her lawyers appealed the court’s decision and in the lead up to a second trial she was deemed mentally incompetent to stand trial and committed to an asylum.

Nearly half a century later, in 1989 in New York City, a group of African American and Hispanic teenagers entered Central Park from Harlem at night and set off on a crime spree, assaulting joggers and bike riders, throwing rocks at cars, and robbing homeless people. The teens described their activity as “wilding,” a reference to a hit rap song by Tone-Lōc called “Wild Thing.” The spree concluded with the rape and brutal beating of a young white woman who was jogging in the park. Within hours, the police rounded up a number of the teens and interrogated them. Five of the teens—the press labeled them “The Central Park Five”—confessed to taking part in the rape and beating. They were tried, convicted, and sent to prison.

These stories, as reported by the mainstream press, seem straightforward. That an African American woman would kill her white doctor over an unpaid bill was tragic, but not unbelievable in the Deep South in the 1950s. That young African American and Hispanic teens,
fueled by violent rap lyrics, would commit heinous acts against an innocent white woman after dark in New York City in the 1980s was met by outrage, but not surprise. New York City in the 1980s, after all, was in the midst of an epidemic of racially fueled crime. Both stories, as reported daily in newspapers and on television for weeks and months on end, captured the attention of local and national readers and viewers until the sagas came to their expected and satisfying ends. Ruby McCollum was insane, but would spend her life in an asylum where she couldn’t hurt anyone else. The Central Park Five got what they deserved. In both cases, many people wished the punishments would have been more severe—many, including Donald Trump in a full page advertisement in several New York newspapers, called for the reinstatement of the death penalty for the Central Park Five—but ultimately the teens were convicted, so justice prevailed.

What made these stories of interracial murder and rape—and the countless others in the intervening decades—seem so straightforward is the way they depend on stereotypes and caricatures in order to achieve resonance with the public’s expectations. These narratives depend on the reduction of real people into cultural images based on race, ethnicity, gender, and class, according to sociologist K. Sue Jewell. Among these cultural images are dominant stereotypes of African American women; Jewell writes, “until the 1980s, there were essentially four categories in which African American women have been portrayed…mammy, Aunt Jemima, Sapphire, and Jezebel” (Jewell 35–36). McCollum, to the public, was either a Jezebel or a Sapphire—described by Deborah Gray White as “a domineering female who consumes men and usurps their role”—or perhaps she was both (White 176). Likewise, a prevailing narrative of race relations in the
United States has long included the “rape myth,” stories of “the rape of a frail white victim by a savage black male” (Smith 2). News stories that fit this narrative of white women’s purity sullied by sexually aggressive black men thus have resonated with readers, even while obscuring the essential individual truth of the characters in the stories. That is, the mainstream media’s handling of stories like those of Ruby McCollum and the Central Park Five gain authenticity by way of templates and types, and in so doing these stories alienate readers from the actual subjects. In short, narratives like these widen the gap between the subjectivities of readers and subjects.

Cultural images like the Jezebel and Sapphire tropes, and prevalent cultural myths like the rape myth are components of “master narratives,” sometimes called metanarratives or grand narratives. The notion of master narratives derives largely from the work of postmodern theorist Jean-François Lyotard, who identifies master narratives as hallmarks of modernity. In the introduction to his 1979 book, The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge, he writes, “I will use the term modern to designate any science that legitimates itself with reference to a meta discourse of this kind making an explicit appeal to some grand narrative” (Lyotard xxiii).

Lyotard defines postmodern, on the other hand, as “incredulity toward metanarratives” (Lyotard xxiv). While this incredulity toward master narratives has shaped postmodern epistemology, master narratives have and continue to play a significant role in how many people understand the world. The postmodern awareness of master narratives has entered the discourse of media

---

8 While the terms metanarrative and master narrative are synonymous, I use master narrative as it carries with it the implication of a master/slave relationship and thus is particularly relevant in discussing race relations in the United States.
studies. Jay Rosen calls the concept of a master narrative a “ghostly matter;” it is “a part of the press that too easily eludes attention: the big story, sometimes the back story, often a fragment of a narrative, that generates all the other stories, which are smaller pieces” (Rosen). While the mainstream press relies on master narratives to package news stories for wide public consumption, some media theorists and journalists recognize the endemic faults of master narratives. National Post columnist Robert Fulford writes, “this broad, sweeping form of history leaves out or marginalizes much of humanity, and focuses on a few central figures to the exclusion of less powerful elements” (Fulford 35). Indeed, for precisely this reason, literary scholars have devised a number of ways to expose and challenge prevailing master narratives.

Intersectional thinking, according to Valerie Smith, can be a means of challenging prevailing master narratives; she writes, “unacknowledged cultural narratives such as those which link racial and gender oppression structure our lives as social subjects; the ability of some to maintain dominance over others depends upon these narratives remaining pervasive but unarticulated” (Smith 21). Master narratives fail rather spectacularly when they don’t account for overlapping narratives or “cultural images” as Jewell calls them. In 1989, Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the phrase “intersectionality,” a hermeneutic that counters “the tendency to treat race and gender as mutually exclusive categories of experience and analysis” (Crenshaw 139). Thus, by articulating the interactions between race and gender and by recognizing “the kinds of silences that structure the social hierarchy in which we live,” according to Smith, all of the “other stories,” the “smaller pieces,” as Rosen calls them, become visible.
The Sapphire/Jezebel tropes and the rape myth pervade our culture—they inform our politics, entertainment, and indeed our news media. Particularly when it comes to complicated matters like the United States’ pockmarked history on race relations and gender roles, the mainstream media turns to master narratives to make sense of the seemingly incomprehensible. But in so doing, the media caricatures the lives of those swept up in the narratives, fails to acknowledge the ways in which intersecting conceptions of race and gender inform our perspectives, and obscures the complicated cultural and social forces that undergird these stories. It is thus an intentional, and in many cases revolutionary, act to attempt to move outside of the dominant narrative and critique it. Stories of crimes committed across race and gender lines, then, are effectives sites at which to think intersectionally against prevailing master narratives. This fact is perhaps paradoxical; these kinds of stories gain popularity in the press particularly because they affirm master narratives, and yet when considered with an ear to the “silences,” they can serve as fault lines in master narratives. Joan Didion, writing about the Central Park jogger case, notes, “criminal cases are widely regarded by American reporters as windows on the city or culture in which they take place, opportunities to enter not only households but parts of the culture normally closed” (Didion 720). When reporters are attentive to master narratives and earnest in their endeavor to work against them by accounting for overlapping themes of race and gender—as literary journalists often are—they can move us beyond the “ghostly matter” of such narratives and toward the real, knowable subjects of stories, as well as the systematic and cultural forces that drive such stories. They can, that is, narrow the gap between the subjectivities of readers and subjects.
This ability to narrow the gap is seen clearly in the African American press, which has often and intentionally been out of step with the mainstream, largely white, press. Thus, it is no surprise that when a major story rocked the African American community in the summer of 1952—the murder of the white doctor by his African American patient—*The Pittsburgh Courier*, a prominent African American newspaper, sent Zora Neale Hurston to cover the trial “with literary flair” (Maguire 19). Indeed, Hurston offers more than literary flair; by painting a portrait of the accused, Ruby J. McCollum, that considers the interstice of race and gender, Hurston works against the stereotypes that sought to conform McCollum to the Sapphire or Jezebel cultural images.

**Zora Neale Hurston Writes "The Life Story of Mrs. Ruby J. McCollum!"**

The murder of Dr. Leroy Adams by Ruby McCollum quickly became national news, and the story that took hold seemed clear. On August 5, 1952 an article from the Associated Press opens simply, “A negro woman shot to death a white doctor Sunday” (“Negro Woman Kills White Physician in His Fla. Office”). Dr. Adams is further described as “Democratic state Senate nominee,” and McCollum as “wife of a fairly well-to-do negro farmer and mother of three” (“Negro Woman Kills White Physician in His Fla. Office”). The short AP article ends where the actual story begins: “Adams was found clutching a $100 bill in the hand and a fountain pen in the other, ‘as if he had been about to make out a receipt’” (“Negro Woman Kills White Physician in His Fla. Office”). Another AP article solidifies the story that would take hold in the press: it reports that Adams was shot “in what was apparently a dispute over a medical bill” and that
McCollum admitted to the murder, “but did not give a reason” (“Popular Florida Physician Slain”). As the trial proceeded, newspapers reported on McCollum’s testimony that she killed Dr. Adams in self defense after he tried to force her to have sex with him, but often subordinated her testimony to the more widely accepted story about the medical bill. On the day she was convicted of the murder and sentenced to death, for example, an AP report concludes by noting that “the defendant’s story that the shooting came during a struggle for a gun produced by Dr. Adams, 42, when she rejected his suggestion of intimacy” was deemed “unreasonable and unbelievable.” The article notes that McCollum testified that she “had carried on an illicit relationship with Adams for six years because she was afraid of him,” but concludes by citing a letter McCollum wrote under duress denying the affair (“Negress Guilty of Murdering Father of Child”). Nearly two years later, after McCollum’s lawyers filed their appeal for a second trial, another AP article concludes, “The state contends Mrs. McCollum killed [Adams] over a bill for professional services. She maintains she was attempting to ward off unwelcome attentions from him” (“Attorney Contends Condemned Woman Was Unfairly Tried”).

Throughout the trial, the court sought to silence McCollum’s testimony, particularly in regards to her sexual relationship with Dr. Adams. McCollum was constantly interrupted by objections from the prosecutor, on the grounds that her testimony was inappropriate. In total, “thirty-eight times [Cannon] attempted to create the opportunity for Ruby to tell her whole story and thus explain what to her were her motives; thirty-eight times the State objected; and thirty-eight times Judge Adams sustained these objections” (Huie 99). Her lawyers were not allowed to build a case for self defense. The prosecution, on the other hand, “played on emotional
traditions” (Hurston, “Doctor’s Threats, Tussle Over Gun Led to Slaying!”). Further, the judge in McCollum’s trial refused to let any reporter talk with McCollum out of fear about what “the outside world might learn and say” (Huie 91). McCollum’s story was suppressed, told through her severely limited testimony in court and without a single opportunity for her to speak outside the trial. So it was that a single, and simplified, narrative took hold, framing McCollum in the cultural images of “Jezebel” or “Sapphire.”

This narrative was created over the course of McCollum’s first trial through the distillation of three “facts” about McCollum: she was not insane when she killed Dr. Adams, their affair was either nonexistent or irrelevant to the murder, and, most significantly, that McCollum is also responsible for the death of her husband Sam by heart attack the day after Ruby McCollum was arrested. Before the trial commenced, McCollum’s lawyers sought an insanity plea, noting that she had been hospitalized previously “for 12 days in January, nine in February and a week in May,” but the court appointed doctor who examined McCollum concluded she is “a person who believes she is ill but isn’t” (“Medic’s Slayer Declared Sane”). Her sanity was determined, according to an AP article, after “X-rays were taken of her chest and back and she was found normal” (“Medic’s Slayer Declared Sane”). In the midst of the trial, the Assistant State’s Attorney told the jury:

This Ruby McCollum is just as sane as I am. She knew what she was doing when she went to Dr. Adams’ office that Sunday morning to kill him. That, gentleman of the jury, is a sly, calculating killer. Every movement she made that morning was a preparation for this day. (quoted in Hurston, Mrs. Ruby J. McCollum! (8))
Determining McCollum’s sanity was essential to conforming her to the Sapphire trope, but she was also linked to the Jezebel image, “more commonly known as the bad-black-girl,” as K. Sue Jewell writes (Jewell 46). While the prosecution made every effort to discredit McCollum’s claims of a sexual relationship with Dr. Adams, the insinuation of such a relationship was enough to paint her as a “worldly seductress” (Jewell 46). A Jezebel would make such a claim, but the jury was “urged not to believe that Ruby McCollum had been the mistress of Dr. Adams” (Hurston, “Doctor’s Threats, Tussle Over Gun Led to Slaying!”). The prosecution framed McCollum’s testimony regarding the affair as absurd, and worse, the prosecution insisted, “The thought was repugnant” (Hurston, “Doctor’s Threats, Tussle Over Gun Led to Slaying!”) Indeed, any time McCollum tried to discuss the affair during her testimony, she was silenced. When her attorney filed for an appeal, he argued that “he had not been allowed to offer testimony about alleged intimacies between the physician and his client,” to which the State Attorney replied, “the details of the relationship between the two were irrelevant to the case” (“Attorney Contends Condemned Woman Was Unfairly Tried”). Thus, McCollum was conformed to Jezebel image, one who “yearns for sexual encounters,” in Jewell’s language (Jewell 46). McCollum’s testimony regarding her affair with Dr. Adams, then, is nothing more than an attempt to besmirch the Dr. Adams’ good name by means of McCollumn’s own “hypersexuality.”

The final “fact,” that of Sam McCollum’s death, was employed to conform Ruby McCollum to both images, the Jezebel as we’ve seen, as well as the Sapphire. While Sam died of a heart attack—he had been complaining in the months prior to his death of chest pains—his
death is also described as the result of “shock” (Hurston, *Mrs. Ruby J. McCollum!* (9)) See, for example, the way Sam McCollum’s death is reported in this AP story: “Mrs. McCollum said she had been Dr. Adams’ mistress for six years and he was the father of one of her children. The 39-year-old woman’s husband died of a heart attack the day after Dr. Adams was shot” (“Retrial of Negress On Slaying Begins Today”). Though the Sapphire trope is most generally applied to the African American woman who emasculates men, Jewell explicitly links Sapphire to African American men. She writes, “the Sapphire image of African American womanhood, unlike other images that symbolize African American women, necessitates the presence of an African American male” (Jewell 45). Jewell’s explanation of the Sapphire trope rests on the emasculation of the African American male through “cunning and trickery” manifest in “verbal put-downs” (Jewell 45), whereas others, like Deborah Gray White, go further, arguing that Sapphire “emasculates men by usurping their role” (White 189). It was well known among the African American community in Live Oak that Sam McCollum had many extramarital affairs, but in the public view, Ruby’s affair in effect usurped Sam’s role and ultimately led to his destruction. Thus, a clear line is drawn in many reports, including the one quoted above, between McCollum’s affair and the death of her husband Sam. Further, in the above AP report, McCollum is described as Dr. Adams’ mistress, thus ascribing to McCollum the role of Jezebel. Depending on who is telling the story, then, McCollum can either be Jezebel the seducer or Sapphire the emasculator. Either way, the narrative took hold: Ruby McCollum is responsible for the ruination and death of two men—one black and one white. This was the narrative that the prosecution used to secure McCollum’s conviction in the first trial, and it was the narrative the mainstream press
spread. The Sapphire and Jezebel narratives might have been the last word on McCollum, if not for the efforts of Zora Neale Hurston, who covered the trial and then in a series of ten articles for *The Pittsburgh Courier* wrote “The Life Story of Mrs. Ruby J. McCollum.” While the story of the murder of Dr. Leroy Adams by Ruby McCollum as reported in the mainstream press seems straightforward, the version told by Hurston, is anything but. Hurston’s reporting on McCollum’s trial provides details and direct quotes from McCollum’s testimony that are not found elsewhere.

As Hurston reports it, on August 3, 1952, McCollum drove to Dr. Adams’ office, with her two youngest children. The office was closed, so she waited in her car. When she finally went in, she sat in the waiting room as there were a few white patients ahead of her. Finally, Dr. Adams came into the waiting room and invited her into his office, even though there were other patients who had been waiting longer. McCollum complained of a pain in her right shoulder, and Dr. Adams gave her a shot of penicillin. She had an outstanding bill, which she paid, while noting to Dr. Adams that the bill “came out to the house to Sam,” her husband (Hurston, “Doctor’s Threats, Tussle Over Gun Led to Slaying!”). Unbeknownst to Sam, McCollum and Dr. Adams had been carrying on an affair for four years prior to 1952, and Adams was the father of McCollum’s youngest daughter, Loretta. After McCollum paid the bill, Dr. Adams “led her back of a screen hiding the operating table and demanded that she get on the table” (Hurston, “Doctor’s Threats, Tussle Over Gun Led to Slaying!”). McCollum told Dr. Adams she was not feeling well and suggested “some other time,” but the doctor was insistent. He struck her twice, to which she replied, “Never again.” Then, according to McCollum, Adams “picked up the gun from somewhere back there” and poked it at her stomach (Hurston, “Doctor’s Threats, Tussle
Over Gun Led to Slaying!”). McCollum was pregnant with a second child by Dr. Adams. They fought over the gun until McCollum shot Dr. Adams four times. She then left the office and drove back home with her children. Shortly after, the police arrived and she was arrested. On December 20, 1953, McCollum was convicted of first degree murder and sentenced to death by electric chair. Her lawyers filed an appeal citing the fact that the jury was taken to inspect the crime scene without the defendant present, a violation of Florida law. Leading up to the second trial, McCollum was deemed mentally incompetent to stand trial and she was committed to the Florida State Hospital, where she stayed until her release in 1974.

Literary Journalism scholar Roberta Maguire writes that Hurston’s purpose in writing “The Life Story” was, in part, “as a corrective to the oversimplified story that was reported in the national mainstream press immediately after the shooting occurred” (Maguire 19). The “official story” Maguire writes, “denied that there was a story, a woman’s story, filled with the complexity and ambiguity of human emotion” (Maguire 20). Maguire, like Carla Kaplan, noted Hurston scholar and editor of *Zora Neale Hurston: A Life in Letters*, sees plentiful comparisons between Hurston’s reporting on McCollum, and the characterization in her most successful novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Kaplan writes, “One of the most astounding things about her coverage of Ruby McCollum is its word-for-word recycling of descriptions used almost twenty years before for Janie Crawford, heroine of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Hurston’s most celebrated and autobiographical character” (Kaplan 608). Hurston wrote McCollum like a fictional character, that is Hurston gave McCollum as full a life on the page as possible. The story that she tells, rather than defined by race, is a universal human story—one of “sympathy and
identification” and an “attempt at self-revelation” as Kaplan writes. Ruby McCollum had been caricatured and reduced in the mainstream media. And, in her own community of Live Oak, she was contorted into yet another narrative; she had come to be kind of symbol of the struggle of African Americans in the South. Hurston writes, “Ruby McCollum has been [newspaper facsimile illegible] in legend and folklore even before her trial begins…on the order of Jesse James, the very boldness of her act and the mystery surrounding it, have made of her a heroine to some.” Some Live Oak residents, Hurston writes, compared McCollum to Paul and Silas, who God rescued from prison in the New Testament, others claimed to have had visions of McCollum as an animal—“cat-like…crying piteously” or, more imaginatively, “a woman with the head of an eagle with a flaming sword in her hand in flowing robes” (Hurston, “Ruby McCollum Fights for Life”). But when Hurston sees McCollum, she beholds “the infinity of the human mind, mother of monsters and angels, and I comprehended the ineffable glory and horror of its creations” (Huie 99).

Hurston’s characterization of McCollum in “The Life Story” largely elides race, and this is intentional. In a letter to William Bradford Huie, Hurston writes, “I repeatedly resisted the urgings of the Courier to ‘angle’ the stories. I have no interest in skin colors at all, but people, individuals as they show themselves” (Kaplan 710). While Hurston frames her resistance to angle the stories as an act of rebellion against the wishes of the editors of The Pittsburgh Courier, this resistance is also a means of introducing a counter narrative to mainstream coverage of McCollum, which rested on readers’ understanding that McCollum was an African
American woman in the Sapphire or Jezebel mode⁹. By not focusing on race in her description of McCollum, Hurston doesn’t deny McCollum’s African American heritage—Hurston describes McCollum as an “extraordinary personality…with the courage to dare every fate, to boldly attack every tradition of her surroundings and even the age-old laws of every land”—but rather amplifies her personhood (Hurston, *Mrs. Ruby J. McCollum! (1)*). If the mainstream press and indeed even the African American press saw McCollum’s story as one mainly about race relations, Hurston worked to show how it was just as much about a woman driven by the desire to be known and loved. To that end, Hurston’s “The Life Story of Mrs. Ruby J. McCollum” works at the intersection of race and gender against the cultural images that the mainstream press used to caricature her.

As a teenager, Hurston writes, McCollum “felt like a blossom on the bare limb of a pear tree in spring,” echoing a similar description of Janie in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. “She wanted beauty and poetry mingled in her life…Ruby Jackson was now ready for life and love” (Hurston, *Mrs. Ruby J. McCollum! (3)*). Hurston notes McCollum’s penchant for reading romances, and her growing knowledge of her power over men. When her husband Sam became unfaithful to her, it hurt as much that he was unfaithful as it did that her power seemed to have dwindled. Hurston writes, “Sam McCollum’s neglect of her for the past few years had caused her to lose confidence in her power to sway men. She had come to feel that she no longer mattered to anybody that way” (Hurston, “Mrs. Ruby J. McCollum! (6)”). In essence, the core of

---

⁹ These names, as cultural images frequently assigned to African American women, were not in wide use at the time of McCollum’s trial in the 1950s, but Deborah Gray White notes, “the image of Sapphire congealed long before it got a name in the mid-twentieth century” (White 176).
McCollum’s sense of herself had been shaken. Hurston observes, “the great tragedy that engulfed them in 1952 might have been avoided had Sam only understood Ruby better” (Hurston, *Mrs. Ruby J. McCollum!* (4)). In Hurston’s telling it was Sam who first hurt McCollum, rather than her affair and crime killing him.

We learn from Hurston’s reporting that McCollum’s and Adams’ affair began shortly after McCollum’s daughter Sonya (her last child with her husband Sam) was born, when McCollum fell sick and Dr. Adams treated her. She asked the doctor then “if something could be done for me to get me well,” to which Dr. Adams replied, “I can do something for you if you will do something for yourself. I will get you well provided you do as I say” (Hurston, *RUBY BARES HER LOVE LIFE*). So when Dr. Adams turned his attention to her, “she did not consider whether she wanted Dr. Adams or not. He was handing back to her a precious treasure that she had considered lost forever. She felt warm and grateful to him” (Hurston, “Mrs. Ruby J. McCollum! (6)”). Whether Dr. Adams understood Ruby or not, he gave her back her sense of herself as a desirable woman. In Hurston’s telling, at least in the beginning, McCollum’s and Adams’ affair reads like a genuine love story. But, eventually, McCollum came to see herself the “victim of a trap”—she suspected that Dr. Adams was drugging her (Hurston, *Mrs. Ruby J. McCollum! (9)*). Over the course of their affair, things deteriorated; Dr. Adams abused McCollum, drugged her, and often forced her to have sex with him, according to McCollum. Once again, as with her husband, McCollum felt as though she lost her sense of self. Hurston writes that McCollum began visiting other doctors “in the search of her old self” and to “free herself from the daze in which she lived” (Hurston, *The Life Story of Mrs. Ruby J. McCollum!* (10)). In short, McCollum
was not mentally well when she killed Dr. Adams, though after the murder, “Ruby says that all she knows is that she seemed to come alive again as she drove into her driveway on that fatal Sunday morning with her two youngest children—and that gun—in the car with her” (Hurston, *The Life Story of Mrs. Ruby J. McCollum! (10)). But her reprieve, according to Hurston, is short lived. After the trial, Hurston writes, Ruby “is still questioning the meanings of her life and what has happened to her…and why” (Hurston, *The Life Story of Mrs. Ruby J. McCollum! (10)).

Ruby McCollum, in Hurston’s rendering, is not a masculinized woman set on destroying men and usurping their power. Nor is she a disgruntled patient angry about a medical bill. She is not a symbol of liberation or a victim of the segregated South. She is a woman who loves and desires to be loved and desired in return. Hurston writes, “I was and am sorry for the poor thing. She was a woman terribly in love, and with us females, that makes strange and terrible creatures of us” (Kaplan 713). McCollum is indeed the victim of a trap, beyond the drugs Dr. Adams gave her to make her compliant—a trap much more universal, the trap, perhaps, of staking one’s identity in the love of another and yet never being able to fully relate with another person. This trap is, in short, experienced by people of all races, and regardless of gender. In the first installment of her series on McCollum, Hurston writes, “The truth is that nobody, not even the closet blood relations, ever really knows anybody else. The greater human travail has been the attempt at self-revelation, but never, since the world began, has anyone on individual completely succeeded” (Hurston, *Mrs. Ruby J. McCollum! (1)). Ruby McCollum’s trouble is indeed that great human travail, and Hurston’s story is an attempt to overcome that travail, even as she starts from an acknowledgment that overcoming it is an impossible task.
Often literary journalism offers a striving toward self-revelation of its subjects, counter to the tendency to conform to master narratives of the mainstream press. Hurston writes of the trial, “it amounted to mass delusion by unanimous agreement. The motive for the slaying had been agreed upon—he dunned her, she got mad, and she killed him; and however bizarre and unlikely this motive might appear either at home or abroad, it was going to be maintained and fought for” (Huie 89). Indeed, master narratives often function as “Mass delusion by unanimous agreement.” Hurston worked to dispel this mass delusion, indeed to close the gulf between the subjectivities of readers and subjects that opens every time people are reduced to archetypes as a means of conforming them to preconceived notions of how society operates. This is the goal of literary journalism, and as such, “The Life Story of Mrs. Ruby J. McCollum” is an exemplar of the genre. And yet, like many of the other works discussed here, it is hardly ever read, if not completely forgotten. For scholars of journalism, with the exception of Roberta Maguire and a few others, it is widely unknown, and for literary scholars of Hurston’s work it appears often only as a peculiar tangent in Hurston’s career—hardly more than a means to make some money when she desperately needed it. In my effort, however, to reimagine the trajectory of the history of literary journalism as one largely initiated by the efforts of women writers working in a sentimental mode in an effort to narrow the gap between the subjectivities of readers and subjects, Hurston’s McCollum stories deserve a prominent place in the canon as they situate McCollum’s humanity at the intersection of her race and gender in a way that few (if any) currently canonized works of literary journalism do.
"Mass delusion by unanimous agreement" is an accurate description of the media climate in New York City in the latter half of 1989. On April 19, a little before 9:00 p.m., Trisha Meili, a successful, young professional woman, left her apartment on Manhattan’s Upper East Side, as she did most nights, for a jog through Central Park. She entered the Park at East 84th Street and headed north, past the Reservoir and continued along East Drive. She turned at 102nd Cross Street Drive and began making her way back south. At around 9:15 p.m., Meili was attacked, hit over the head with a large branch. Her attacker dragged her off the road toward an unpaved pathway that borders a small body of water called the Loch. There she was brutally beaten with a rock and raped. Her attacker tied her up with her own shirt and left her naked, bleeding into the dirt. She was discovered four hours later by two men who were walking home through the park and heard muffled groans coming from alongside the path. They saw Meili, her body soaked in blood and twitching. They ran for help immediately. At the corner of 102nd Street Cross Drive and East Drive they encountered two police officers sitting in their patrol car. The police officers accompanied the men back to the spot where they found Meili. They called an ambulance, and in the meantime one of the officers attempted to talk to her. She was unresponsive. One of her eyes was swollen shut, and, while the other was open, it didn’t seem to be seeing anything. She had no identification on her; even her keys, which had been tucked in a small pouch attached to her shoe, were missing. When the ambulance arrived, she was transported to Metropolitan Hospital on First Avenue. There it was discovered that she had lost between 75 and 80 percent of the
blood in her body, she was comatose and hypothermic. It seemed unlikely that she would live through the night\(^\text{10}\). But, against all odds, Meili survived.

Earlier that evening, around the same time Meili was leaving her apartment, a group of around 30 teenagers—mostly African American and Hispanic boys—entered Central Park from the north, from Harlem. Some members of the group, it seemed, were bent on violence. Heading south through the park, they attacked several joggers, stole a sandwich from a homeless man, and threw rocks at taxis. Their final victim was a jogger making his way around the Reservoir. Some in the group attacked him near the tennis courts and beat him badly. Perhaps because of the severity of this beating, most of the group of teens dispersed, exiting the park at various outlets. But by then, a few of the group’s victims had made their way to the Central Park Precinct building, just south of the Reservoir, and reported attacks by a large group of teenagers. Police were dispatched into the park looking to round up any of the teens that they could find. Several boys were arrested and taken to the precinct. Police officers called their parents. While they waited for all the parents of the suspects to arrive, news reached the precinct of the brutal beating and rape of Trisha Meili. What might have just been convictions for misdemeanor crimes suddenly escalated. The boys would not be leaving the precinct any time soon. Over the course of several hours, the police interrogated each of the suspects, and through what has come to be understood as coercion, evoked videotaped confessions from five of the boys—Raymond Santana, Kevin Richardson, Antron McCray, Yusef Salaam, and Korey Wise. None of them admitted to actually raping Meili, rather they admitted to being present for the rapes and

\(^{10}\text{Much of this narration is derived from Sarah Burns’ excellent book The Central Park Five: A Chronicle of a City Wilding (2011).}\)
implicated others in actually raping Meili. In two separate trials, the five boys were convicted of a number of charges including attempted murder, assault, robbery, and rape, and sentenced to between six and 13 years in prison.

In New York City the story of the crime and subsequent trial was a sensation. Meili, who because of a long-standing tradition of not naming rape victims remained unnamed in most news sources, came to be known only as “The Central Park Jogger.” Her attackers were “The Central Park Five.” The story came to symbolize the best and worst about New York City. Meili represented the best—she was described as “Lady Courage” and “A Profile in Courage.” An opinion piece in the New York Times notes that “she has taken on mythic proportions,” and describes her as “a celebrity nobody knows” and a symbol of “New York rising above the dirt” (Quindlen). The Central Park Five, on the other hand, represented all that had gone wrong in the City. Headlines referred to them as a “wolfpack.” They were described as “packs of bloodthirsty teens from the tenements” (“Wolf Pack’s Prey”). Donald Trump, then just a celebrity businessman, took out a one-page ad in all four of the major New York newspapers calling for return of the death penalty, referring to the Central Park Five as “roving bands of wild criminals” and “crazed misfits.” The same opinion piece that praised Meili as a symbol of “resurrection” calls the trial of the Central Park Five “a microcosm of city living at its worst: sordid, mean, racially charged” (Quindlen). The Central Park Five symbolized “a savage disease,” according to Pete Hamill, writing in the New York Post (Hamill). In short, the sides were clearly drawn, “Heroic Woman vs. Feral Beast,” according to Lynnell Hancock (Hancock).
While many people saw flaws in the trial and conviction of the Central Park Five, it wasn’t until 2002 when convicted rapist Matias Reyes, who was incarcerated at the Auburn Correctional Facility, admitted to being Meili’s rapist. He provided detailed information about the crime, and DNA evidence, which hadn’t linked any of the Central Park Five to the crime, confirmed that indeed Reyes was guilty. On December 19, 2002, the convictions of Central Park Five were vacated, though they had all served out their prison terms by then. The New York City press, which had obsessed over the story back in 1989, ranged from incredulous to indifferent in its 2002 coverage. Sarah Burns writes, “though the convictions were vacated, erased in the court system as if they had never existed, the media coverage that told the new story was nowhere near as noisy as the original reporting had been” (Burns 203). Where there was noise, however, it mostly sought to call into question Reyes’ confession and express incredulity about The Central Park Five’s innocence. Among the most incendiary of those who doubted the innocence of the Central Park Five was Ann Coulter. Of the DNA evidence that pointed to Reyes as the actual rapist, Coulter writes, “This is completely false,” blaming it on liberals who “so long to claim that every criminal is innocent.” She concludes, “two juries already heard all the arguments now being reported as ‘new evidence’ in the media and unanimously rejected them. This isn’t the latest Scottsboro Boys case. It’s the latest Tawana Brawley case” (Coulter).

The two cases Coulter cites are significant. In 1987, just two years before the Central Park Jogger Case, Tawana Brawley, an African American teenager from Wappingers Falls, New

11 Coulter described the teens as “animals,” “ primitives,” and “savages.” She wrote, “Probably feeling ‘humiliated,’ in 1989, a mob of feral beasts descended on Central Park to attack joggers and bicyclists. They brutalized a female jogger while incomprehensibly chanting ‘Wild Thing’ in their ghetto patois.”
York, accused four white men of raping her. But in 1988, a grand jury decided that there had been no rape and that Brawley had made up the story. Like the Central Park Jogger Case, the Brawley case ignited racial tensions. By suggesting that the admission of guilt by Reyes in the rape of Meili was the latest Tawana Brawley case, Coulter links Reyes’ confession to what has come to be understood as a hoax. Even more significant, however, is Coulter’s reference to the Scottsboro Boys, because it is here that the media coverage of the Central Park Jogger case comes into line with the master narrative that fueled it, namely the “rape myth.” In March 1931, two white women accused nine African American teenagers of raping them on a train, eight of whom were ultimately convicted and sentenced to death. After three additional trials, including before the U.S. Supreme Court, charges were dropped for four of the defendants, while the rest received sentences ranging from 75 years to death. In time, others would have their convictions overturned, culminating in a 2013 posthumous pardon of the remaining three Scottsboro boys. This case, according to Lisa Lindquist Dorr, “has become the paradigm for all black-on-white rape cases in the twentieth century, in which the accuser’s whiteness overrode any consideration of her gender, sexual history, or class status” (Dorr 8). Dorr continues, “This case seemingly proved the power of the ‘rape myth’: that white southerners accepted all white women’s accounts of rape when they accused black men, thereby instigating a united effort to seek revenge” (Dorr 4). The ‘rape myth’ dates back to the days after Reconstruction, when “whites conflated black men’s desires for white women with their desire for political rights as men.” Dorr notes that the myth is dependent on “white women’s role as the symbolic guardians of white purity and virtue”

12 It should be noted that years later, Brawley maintains that she was raped, and many people, particularly in the African American community, continue to believe her.
(Dorr 12). So pervasive is the rape myth, that its strong resonances shaped the media coverage of the Central Park Jogger case in 1989.

All the familiar elements are there: The Central Park Five were represented as sub-human beasts on the prowl. Meili, The Central Park Jogger, was the paradigm of purity, albeit adapted to a late twentieth century context—“pretty and educated and white,” as William Glaberson wrote in the New York Times during the trial in 1990 (Glaberson). And the desire for revenge, manifest in the rash of lynchings in the early-twentieth century is clearly seen in, amongst other things, Donald Trump’s advertisement calling for the reinstatement of the death penalty. Indeed, as Valerie Smith writes, “as the media coverage and public response to recent criminal cases involving the hint, the allegation, or the fact of interracial rap demonstrate, a variety of cultural narratives that historically have linked sexual violence with racial oppression continue to determine the nature of public response to them” (Smith 5). As we saw in the McCollum case, however, literary journalists, in their effort to narrow the gap between the subjectivities of reader and subject, write against the master narratives that shape media coverage and public response. Joan Didion, in an essay titled “Sentimental Journeys, published in the January 17, 1991 issue of The New York Review of Books, did just that.

“We know her story,” Didion writes of Meili in the opening of her piece, and yet, over the next several pages, it becomes increasingly clear how little we actually know. Didion undercuts the assertion that we know her story in the very same sentence: “some of us, although not all of us, which was to become one of the story’s several equivocal aspects, know her name” (Didion 685). That Meili was not named, according to Didion, was “one reason the victim in this case
could be so readily abstracted” (Didion 689). That is, though her anonymity was purportedly for her own benefit—and this is the subject of significant scrutiny by Didion and others—that same anonymity also made it possible for the media to project onto Meili the symbolic status she came to embody. In an update to the rape myth, Meili didn’t explicitly symbolize white purity—though one needn’t strain too hard to see the clear racial underpinnings—but rather a kind of class and sophistication associated with New York City. Didion notes an “emphasis on perceived refinements of character and of manner and of taste” that “tended to distort and to flatten, and ultimately to suggest not the actual victim of an actual crime but a fictional character of a slightly earlier period, the well-brought-up virgin who briefly graces the city with her presence and receives in turn a taste of ‘real life’” (Didion 697). Didion calls this likening of Meili to the perceived class and sophistication of New York City a “pernicious nostalgia,” noting that, among the reasons given for not naming Meili in the press “was so that she could go unrecognized…to Bloomingdale’s” (Didion 697). Valerie Smith reads in the objectification of Meili significant gender and racial overtones; she writes that Meili “became a pawn in the struggle of privileged white men to regain control of their city” (Smith 13).

For some, Meili was more than “a fictional character of a slightly earlier period,” she was a symbol of the City itself. Didion quotes John Gutfreund, chairman and CEO of Salomon Brothers, Meili’s employer, as saying Meili was “the personification of ‘what makes this city so vibrant and great,’” the victim of “a side of our city that is as awful and terrifying as the creative side is wonderful” (Didion 689). Didion writes, “It was precisely in this conflation of victim and city, this confusion of personal woe with public distress, that the crime’s ‘story’ would be found,
its lesson, its encouraging promise of narrative resolution” (Didion 689). This conflation has a
dehumanizing effect on Meili, the actual victim of the crime. When her story becomes our story,
she is no longer the victim, we are. And thus even Meili’s suffering is taken from her in an effort
to serve a larger narrative about race and crime.

Here, Didion highlights an important feature of master narratives: they seek to reshape
the messiness of life into a coherent narrative that can be understood and, significantly, resolved.
By the time the trial of the Central Park Five was underway, Didion notes, “the attack on the
jogger had by then passed into narrative...about what was wrong with the city and about its
solution. What was wrong with the city had been identified, and its names were Raymond
Santana, Yusef Salaam, Antron McCray, Kharey Wise, Kevin Richardson, and Steve Lopez” (Didion 696). Later Didion writes, “the narrative comforts us with the assurance that the world is
knowable, even flat” (Didion 709). The title of Didion’s essay underlines how she ascribes this
narrativization of The Central Park Jogger Case to sentimentalism. However, I argue that what
she is describing is not sentimentalism, but rather sensationalism when she writes about the
“preference for broad strokes, for the distortion and flattening of character and the reduction of
events to narrative” (Didion 702). As I argue in the previous chapter, sentimental writing in the
late nineteenth and early twentieth century actually worked against the kind of distortion and
flattening that Didion describes here. Rather, it seems that Didion, writing in 1991—almost a

13 Korey Wise’s name, as well as the names of others of The Central Park Five and their families, were often
misspelled in the press, a point noted ironically by Didion herself. She writes, “indifference to the world of the
defendants extended even to reporting of names and occupations” (Didion 720).
14 Lopez was arrested along with The Central Park Five, but accepted a bargain to plead guilty to robbery and
assault rather than stand trial for the rape of Meili (Burns 177).
century since sentimental writing came to be considered passé in literary circles—is using “sentimental” to mean nostalgic and romantic. And indeed, as we’ve seen, the descriptions do harken back to an earlier time, though it is one in which stereotypes such as the purity of white women and the savagery of black men held sway. Though she may be conflating terms, Didion’s essay effectively eviscerates this dangerous nostalgia, dependent as it is on the heightening of contrasts between genders, races, and classes. At the same time, though Didion is hardly ever considered a sentimental writer—and indeed her negative use of the term suggests that she herself might bristle at such a classification—in her work in general and specifically in “Sentimental Journeys,” her prose invites the reader to come closer to the characters she describes, to see the world from their perspective even when, in the case of Trisha Meili at the time Didion’s essay was published, they are largely unknowable. Like Hurston, Didion seems to acknowledge this unknowability, and yet it doesn’t stop her from inviting readers to try. Long after the particular style that has come to be associated with sentimentalism had passed out of fashion, this legacy remains, the effort to evoke fellow feeling and ultimately to narrow the gap between the subjectivities of readers and subjects.

In the case of The Central Park Jogger, Didion recognizes that the accepted narrative actually works to obscure deep-rooted societal and cultural issues. When a master narrative is imposed, Didion writes, “much of what happens…will be rendered merely illustrative, a series of set pieces or performance opportunities” (Didion 713). Indeed, as we saw in the case of Ruby McCollum, different communities can conjure their own narratives to explain events. In the mainstream press, the Central Park Jogger story was about all that was wrong with the City, “a
city systematically ruined, violated, raped by its underclass.” The African American press told a different story, however. There, the narrative was of “a city in which the powerless had been systematically ruined, violated, raped by the powerful” (Didion 715). The pernicious thing about master narratives, of course, is that they function by embedding a needle of truth deep within their haystack of sensationalized stereotypes and caricatures. New York City in the late 1980s and early 1990s was racked by systemic failures that for decades disadvantaged people of color, and as a result crime had risen to epidemic proportions. The narrative, Didion writes, obscured “the economic and historical groundwork for the situation in which the city found itself” (Didion 726). Valerie Smith complicates Didion’s diagnosis by pointing to deep issues related to gender and race at work here. She writes, “rather than addressing the systemic violence and misogyny that makes women unsafe in this society, the media articulated its critique in terms that replicated racist stereotypes” (Smith 13). Didion, in her critique of the media coverage of The Central Park Jogger Case, works explicitly to undercut this narrative of replicated racist stereotypes.

**The Journey Continues**

Indeed, the work of breaking down the master narratives surrounding The Central Park Jogger Case continues. In 2011, Sarah Burns, daughter of documentary film maker Ken Burns, released *The Central Park Five: A Chronicle of a City Wilding*, followed by a documentary film also called *The Central Park Five*, and released in 2013. In both of these works, but particularly in the documentary, Burns allows The Central Park Five to speak for themselves, to tell their story and thus shed the “wolfpack” caricature. The Central Park Jogger herself, Trisha Meili,
published a book in 2003 titled *I am the Central Park Jogger: A Story of Hope and Possibility*, in which she officially identifies herself—though by 2003 her identity was widely known—and writes about her life before and after the attack. In the ever quickening news cycle, even at the end of the twentieth century before the advent of cable news and the internet, journalism’s reliance on master narratives is less a bug than a feature; it is accepted as the only way to even momentarily capture the short attention of the news consuming public as I explore further in the Coda. It is the work, then, of literary journalists like Zora Neale Hurston and Joan Didion to slow the story down and set the record straight by digging beneath the overarching narrative—ultimately to restore to the subjects of news stories the humanity that cultural images and master narratives deprive them of. The people behind the headlines—particular women—are either radicalized or sexualized, but hardly considered as fully human embodiments of both their race and gender. They can not be truly seen by looking just at their race or their gender, but rather by considering the complicated mix of categories that inform their human experience. We know this, perhaps, but it helps to be reminded through great literary journalism that works against such narratives.
In early 2014, a number of writers began to use Instagram, the photo sharing platform, for more than creating, stylizing, and sharing personal photographs to a particular group of friends, acquaintances, and followers, and rather as a journalistic tool. Instagram is perhaps an unlikely medium for literary journalism and yet it has played host to short works that very much resemble vignettes and sketches that were popular in the nineteenth century periodical press. Writers like Ruddy Roye, Jeff Sharlet, and Neil Shea have paired their photos with short narratives, constrained to 2200 characters by Instagram’s caption limit. The effect is similar to that of “Flash Fiction”—short, impactful self-contained stories—except that these stories are true and paired with a related photograph. While the genre is called by a number of different names—and in the three years I’ve been studying this work, still no consensus has emerged—I refer to it as the “InstaEssay.” Jeff Sharlet has received the most attention for his InstaEssays in part because he’s the most well known journalist of the initially small group that began work in the genre. But Sharlet was by no means the first; that honor, according to National Geographic writer and InstaEssayist Neil Shea, belongs to Brooklyn-based photographer and photojournalist Ruddy Roye.
From the start, a variety of media outlets picked up on this trend and located it within the scope of literary journalism. The website Longreads, which typically collects and syndicates long form reporting and essays, collected Sharlet’s #nightshift series and included an essay by Sharlet on the work. There he refers to the form as “Snapshot Journalism” and locates its lineage within the frame of comic books, which use words and pictures, and snapshots, which, he points out, anyone can take. Sharlet concludes his essay by noting, “It’s not the news. It’s not journalism in any conventional sense. It’s, Look at this! It’s, I saw these people, and I wanted you to see them, too” (Sharlet, “#Nightshift”). Compare Sharlet’s definition with Norman Sims’ description of the nineteenth century newspaper sketch, “It can be considered like an artist’s sketch—not fully developed, or simply impressionistic—as opposed to, say, an oil painting.” But unlike the artist’s sketch, he notes, “newspaper sketches were not studies for later, more fully developed treatments; they were complete as published” (Sims, True Stories 46). It turns out that the internet, though in some ways unlike any medium that has come before it, has reconfigured the media landscape in such a way that it bears closer similarities to the nineteenth century than the twentieth. This is what new technologies and media do and have been doing for centuries—they respond to and in turn create social and cultural change. Indeed, the advent of the genre of InstaEssays provides an opportunity to consider the ways that media shifts lead to proliferations of literary journalism throughout history. Rather than supplant the media that comes before, emerging media join the cacophony, providing ever more venues for literary journalists to tell their stories. It’s a complicated mix of circumstances that seem to whet the appetites of readers for a kind of journalism that does more than report “just the facts.”
The Rapid Media Change Theory

In his 1992 book *A Sourcebook of American Literary Journalism: Representative Writers in an Emerging Genre*, Thomas Connery posits that literary journalism appeared in three distinct periods. This conception of the history of the genre has held up quite well; nearly every other scholar who attempts a history of the genre—from major figures in the field such as Sims and Hartsock to my current study—uses Connery’s periodization as a jumping off point. It’s held up so well, frankly, because it appears true. In the opening chapter of this project, I show that, by collecting primary sources of literary journalism and charting them over time, the three periods can be seen distinctly, with a fourth period appearing to span the end of the twentieth and beginning of the twenty-first centuries, after Connery’s book was published.

What accounts for this distinct periodization, however, is less widely agreed upon. Connery suggests that the first period (the mid- to late-nineteenth century), and by extension those that follow, “are at least partially fueled by a cultural need to know and understand the rapidly changing world and by a staunch faith that reality was comprehensible through printed prose” (Connery, “A Third Way to Tell the Story: Amerian Literary Journalism at the Turn of the Century” 4). Hartsock, though he agrees and utilizes Connery’s periodization in his own historiography, pushes back on this notion. Hartsock writes, “Clearly periods of rapid change have occurred throughout history, but they did not necessarily result in a literary journalism” (J. Hartsock, *A History* 14). Somewhat paradoxically, however, later in his book Hartsock seems to affirm Connery’s theory about the need to understand a rapidly changing world. Of the second
phase of literary journalism, Hartsock writes, “The advent of the Great Depression prompted a reevaluation of journalistic practice... The observation is important because what emerges is that in times of social transformation and crisis an objectified rhetoric proves even more inadequate” (J. Hartsock, *A History* 167). Indeed, Hartsock shifts the emphasis a bit from Connery’s understanding. For Hartsock, it is not necessarily the desire to understand change, but rather the inadequacy of what he calls “objectified rhetoric” to make sense of the change that prompts a proliferation of literary journalism.

Nevertheless, both Connery and Hartsock hitch the historical periods of literary journalism to times of rapid change or social transformation and crisis. History bears this out. The first period of literary journalism in the United States roughly begins, as this study has shown, in the years leading up to the Civil War and gains momentum through the end of the nineteenth century. A lull follows until, as Hartsock notes, the advent of Great Depression in the 1930s, and for the next two decades literary journalism flourishes. The next period, the so-called New Journalism, emerges in the midst of the tumult of the 1960s and 70s when a combination of the Civil Rights Movement, the Vietnam War, and counter-cultural movements led to the most celebrated period in the history of literary journalism. We can add to these periods our current literary journalism moment and though it is difficult to identify a catalyst while we’re in it, we could posit perhaps a number of instigating factors such as the terror attacks of September 11, 2001, the subsequent years of ongoing war, the technology boom and bust, the financial downturn, and the surge of nationalism and xenophobia that led to the election of Donald Trump.
So, there is no question that the four periods of literary journalism, spanning nearly two centuries, are tied to “times of social transformation and crisis” but of course these times are not the only explanations available for the distinct periods. To the rapid social change theory of the periodization of literary journalism, I would add another, which I call the rapid media change theory. Looking back at the past two hundred years with an eye toward significant shifts in news media particularly, a convincing picture emerges. Technical innovations that lead to new media—from the penny press, to general interest and then special interest magazines, to the advent of cable news and the internet—correlate rather precisely with the four periods of literary journalism. Significantly, it is not the new media eliminate legacy media the precedes them—in fact, this is rarely the case. Rather, new media often reshape the entire media landscape, forcing existing media to adapt. Through this process of innovation and adaptation, the rapid media change theory accounts for the periodization of literary journalism. In order to garner a more complete understanding, then, of the history and periodization of literary journalism, it is essential to consider the rapid media change theory alongside the dominant rapid social change theory. Alan Liu, in “Imaging the New Media Encounter,” theorizes the relationship between social change and the emergence of new media as a conversion experience. He writes, “It might be hypothesized that all major changes in the socio-cultural order are channeled symbolically and/or instrumentally through narratives of media change — to the point, indeed, that such narratives often take on the significance of conversion experiences” (Liu). In many ways, their relationship is cyclical: the emergence of new media often coincides with social change, causing old media to adapt and respond to social change, which, in turn, leads to the emergence of new
media. Indeed, while the rapid social change theory offers a convincing explanation for the periodization of literary journalism, it can’t be divorced from “narratives of media change,” or, as I’m proposing, the rapid media change theory.

To illustrate, let’s take another brief journey through the history of literary journalism, with an eye toward the impact of emerging media. Alongside the social upheaval wrought by the Civil War, the Industrial Revolution, and increasing access for women to the public sphere in the early- to mid-nineteenth century, the second half of the century is marked by a significant increase in the number of newspapers available to American readers. This is in large part due to the advent of the penny papers, inexpensive newspapers made possible because the cost of newspaper production went down and the amount of advertising in the papers skyrocketed. Then, though magazines predate the founding of the United States, the 1920s and 30s is widely understood to be the period in which they flourished despite the Great Depression. There are a number of reasons for this, as we’ll see, but with the newspaper industry firmly aligned with objective journalism by this point and in the midst of an ongoing feud with the emerging medium of broadcast radio, another mass medium for delivering news alongside more general interest topics was necessary. It is no surprise that most of the literary journalism from this second period was published in magazines.

Magazines play a significant role in the next period as well, though, in the midst of the social upheaval of the 1960s and 70s, magazines came to fill another role within American culture. In part due to the ubiquity of televisions in American homes, and the advent of the television news magazine, general interest print magazines began to shift to, or be replaced by,
niche special interest magazines catering to smaller, but more tightly knit subcultures. Think *New York* and *Rolling Stone*, both home to some of the most-read literary journalism of the era. And finally, the end of the twentieth century gave us the internet, which facilitated wide access to legacy media content as well as innovative ways for literary journalists to tell their stories. What is perhaps most interesting about this current period is not that new technology brought entirely new forms of literary journalism—though that is true as we’ll see in the form of social media and virtual reality or augmented reality story telling—but how much more like the nineteenth century our current media landscape is than any of the intervening years. Mainstream newspapers and magazines are exploring new ways to attract and maintain readers with new business models and ways of presenting stories, while blogs and social media have, to an extent, expanded access to news and information in a way not seen since the days of the penny press.

Viewing the four periods of literary journalism through the lens of emerging media shifts our focus to consider not just the social situation from which literary journalism arises, but indeed the technologies and trends that arise from those social situations and subsequently shape media and society. Importantly, the rapid media change theory of the history of literary journalism doesn’t just show how new media leads to prolific periods for literary journalism in general, but indeed how media change is instrumental in ensuring that the voices of women literary journalists are amplified in each period. Indeed, as this project has shown throughout, the evolving understanding of women’s role in society has led to greater access for women to the public sphere, but emerging media are equally important in understanding how, for nearly two
hundred years, women literary journalists have been working within the genre to write against prevailing narratives and caricatures of women in the mainstream media.

Surveying media change in the 1960s, Jean Chance and William McKeen identify the common thread that time and again leads to the emergence of literary journalism, no matter the media: “What journalists learned—rediscovered is more accurate—was that readers want stories. They want what they’ve always wanted, really—great storytelling” (Chance and McKeen xi). Great storytelling comes in many forms—it always has—but today the number of forms available to literary journalists seems infinite in part because, as we’ll see, rather than replace preceding media, new media reshapes the landscape and makes room for itself in the ever-crowding field.

The Penny Press

As readers in twenty-first century America, it may be difficult to wrap our heads around the difference between the relatively expensive in the 1830s six-penny paper and its upstart rival, the one-penny (or just penny) paper. Perhaps a corollary would be paying $2.50 for a weekday issue of The New York Times versus picking up a free copy of The Metro outside a subway stop. Or maybe it’s more like just reading Times articles online for free. But neither of these examples get at the revolutionary nature of the penny press, the way the introduction of a newspaper that was affordable to the masses revolutionized not only the way news was delivered in the nineteenth century, but even what counted as news. As Sari Edelstein writes, “The emergence of the penny papers was the most significant innovation in journalism in the first half of the
nineteenth century. Not only did the penny papers revolutionize who could afford to read the newspaper, but they also dramatically altered what a newspaper was” (Edelstein 38). While the advent of the penny press is tied inextricably to the social changes that marked the era such as Reconstruction, industrialization, the influx of European immigrants, and the emergence of the New Woman, it is important to consider the effect of the medium itself on what would become literary journalism.

The penny press was made possible, as so many media innovations are, by new technology, which drastically reduced the cost of printing. In this case, the technology was a combination of mechanical production of wood pulp paper—a much less expensive and more readily available alternative to rag paper—and the steam-powered printing press, designed by Friedrich Koenig and first utilized to print the November 29, 1814 issue of The Times of London (Kovarik 67). The effect of the wood pulp paper and the steam-powered press goes beyond saving printers from the physical stresses of manual labor and printing papers faster; because so many papers could be produced so quickly (Kovarik suggests a fourfold increase in efficiency), the cost of newspapers went down, circulation went up, and advertising revenue went way up.

When the steam-powered press reached New York in the 1930s, the penny press revolution followed closely behind. There were a few false starts; Horace Greeley sold his Morning Post for a penny but it failed. Likewise, efforts by publishers in Boston and Philadelphia never got off the ground (Kovarik 71). It was Benjamin Day and his New York Sun that found the right formula, combining the one penny price with pages full of scandals and hoaxes to titillate readers—many of whom were newly emigrated and poor. Kovarik notes, “Day
realized that New Yorkers were far more interested in a man who was arrested for beating his wife than they were in Andrew Jackson and the fight over the United States Bank” (Kovarik 71). Penny papers like *The New York Sun* could tell both stories—often on the same page.

The penny papers set themselves against the “elitist” six-penny papers, claiming the ability to reach both working class readers while pulling readers away from their six-penny rivals. The *Sun’s* slogan was, in fact, “It shines for all.” And indeed the penny press was read by all—or, at least, a lot—as circulation surged in the era of the penny press. For the first time since the nation’s founding, news and information was widely available to the populace regardless of education, economic status, and, significantly, gender. But the revolution brought on by the availability of less expensive printing methods wasn’t limited to the penny papers themselves. Indeed, the increased competition that the penny papers spurred among existing papers and newcomers alike upended the entire newspaper publishing industry. To compete with the accessibility of penny papers, legacy publications had to adapt their format, and new genres of newspapers emerged, including the story paper, which often published sensational and otherwise amusing fictions alongside the news of the day.

While Edelstein argues convincingly that the penny papers reified masculinity and profited off women with “fallen women” stories, Sylvia D. Hoffert explains, “starting in 1852, [penny press papers] devoted an impressive amount of space to describing the activities of woman’s rights advocates both in terms of the number and the length of their articles” (Hoffert 658). Hoffert surveys the headlines, stories, and editorial comment of three newspapers, the *New York Daily Herald, New York Daily Times*, and *New York Daily Tribune* and argues that though
not all of the coverage was favorable and was sometimes exploitative, the penny press “became a conduit through which woman’s rights activists communicated with the general public, thereby rescuing the movement without a newspaper of its own from relative obscurity” (Hoffert 662). Among that general public was a significant number of women readers for whom it was novel to read about women making news. Beyond just reporting on woman’s rights activists, however, the penny press era saw the arrival of women writers into the newsrooms of the major urban papers.

Consider, for example, Fanny Fern who, writing for *The New York Ledger* in 1856-1872, became the highest-paid newspaper columnist in the United States (McMullen). *The New York Ledger* was not, itself, a penny paper; rather it was a story paper. The *Ledger* like other story papers was a weekly as opposed to a daily and it sold for six cents. The *Ledger*’s history in fact typifies the way emerging media—in this case the penny press—force existing media to adapt. In 1851, Robert Bonner bought what was then called *The Merchant’s Ledger and Statistical Record*, and over the course of the next four years he removed the market news and statistics and reshaped it into a story paper to compete in the new media landscape brought on by the penny press. In 1856, Bonner enlisted Fern at the rate of one hundred dollars per column, “by far the highest price that has ever been paid by any newspaper publisher to any author,” as Bonner boasted in the pages of *The Ledger*. Indeed, Claire C. Pettengill, equates the progress of women in the era with the progress of newspapers: “the *Ledger* associates women’s interests with ‘progress,’ the same inevitable force that gives the newspaper its power.” She goes on to assert that this identification with women’s progress and that of the newspaper is assisted by “the increasing number of female readers, as well as women writers, whose success profited
newspapers like the Ledger” (Pettengill 77). Thus, the penny press era represents a significant media revolution—the first mass media—and set the stage not only for the birth of literary journalism, but indeed for the women writers who would define its earliest years.

Magazines in the Early Twentieth Century

It is difficult to say exactly when the era of the penny press papers came to an end, but the reasons it ended are more clear. The last decades of the nineteenth century saw a shift toward “the scientific values of rationality and neutrality,” according to Kathy Forde and Katherine Foss (Forde and Foss 138). In 1896, Adolph Ochs bought The New York Times, and, Forde and Foss write, he “differentiated his journalism from that of the yellow journals by vigorously promoting an objective-voiced, fact-centered form of news report that focused on business news and public affairs” (Forde and Foss 138). Whereas the penny papers democratized information by making it accessible to all, Och’s Times aimed to be the choice paper of the elite. Ultimately, the Times, rose to prominence and became the most respected newspaper in the country, and with it, the so-called objective brand of journalism it touted became the benchmark to which other newspapers aspired.

As the ideal of objectivity took hold, the number of newspapers in print rose until its peak in 1909. Even after, as the number of newspapers declined, the circulation numbers rose exponentially (Peterson 46). And yet it is in this period that the magazine rose to prominence in the United States. It might seem that with the great increases in media available to the average American—radio also came of age in these decades—the field would be too crowded for
magazines, but, as Peterson suggests, it might be just this proliferation of media that led to the growth of the magazine industry. Peterson writes, “each new medium has stimulated rather than diminished use of existing media” (Peterson 48). As was the case with the advent of the penny press, existing media must adapt, however, in order for its use to be stimulated. Indeed, a look at the kinds of magazines that were available to American readers in the 1920s and 30s confirms adaptation.

While magazines were printed in the United States long before, the twentieth century marked the dawn of the inexpensive, mass market magazine. As was the case with the penny press, this emerging medium was in large part due to technological innovations. Arthur and Lila Weinberg, in the introduction to their book *The Muckrakers*, suggest two such innovations. The first is the same technology that led to the penny press, wood pulp paper and the steam powered printing press, but they also point to another technology born in the nineteenth century and readily available at the start of the twentieth that would enable the hallmark of magazines, photography. That is, the early twentieth century saw the proliferation of photoengraving techniques (Weinberg and Weinberg xviii). This technology enabled the pairing of photographs with works of literary journalism, a longstanding feature of the genre—perhaps most famously evidenced in James Agee and Walker Evans’ 1936 book *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, which, significantly, began as an assignment for *Fortune* magazine. The “Golden Age of Photojournalism” in fact corresponds with the second period in the history of literary journalism and it continues through the decline of the third period in the 1970s.
As the title suggests, the Weinbergs’ book focuses on the first major trend in magazine publishing in the United States, muckraking. While muckraking continues today, as a national phenomenon it was short-lived; most accounts posit the advent of World War I as its end. But among the impacts muckraking’s popularity on the magazine press was to distinguish the kind of writing one would find in magazines from that in newspapers and thus to set the stage for the boom in magazine publishing that was to follow. It’s worth noting, as well, that the early muckrakers performed a kind of literary journalism and that muckraking, as a journalistic endeavor, remains an important component of contemporary literary journalism.

The next trend in magazine publishing was the rise of the general interest magazine, a kind of national newspaper that addressed wider swaths of the population than local periodicals could. These magazines responded to the flood of media available to Americans by serving to compress it into digestible formats accessible to all. In the prospectus they wrote for *Time* magazine in 1923, for example, Henry Luce and Briton Hadden argued that the American public was largely uninformed, but not for a lack of information but rather because “no publication has adapted itself to the time which busy men are able to spend simply keeping informed” (qtd. in Peterson 298). What was needed, they suggested, was a publication—such as *Time*—that could compress the stream of information and interpret it for readers. Indeed the digest format, typified as well by *Reader’s Digest*, rose to prominence in this era. Peterson writes, “The digest magazines plucked articles from the myriad publications which confronted the reader at the newsstand and boiled them down into short pieces with short words and short sentences” (Peterson 294). Of course, the practice of reprinting news stories from other periodicals was very
common in the nineteenth century, but as the objective news model took hold, this practice was phased out of newspapers and carried on by general interest digest magazines.

Magazine editors did not share their newspaper colleagues’ allegiance to objectivity and the disinterested reporter; commentary and explanation were important to the magazine medium. Thus, John Hartsock writes, “It would be largely in the magazine press that a narrative literary journalism would find a more active voice in an attempt to provide ‘news on the subject’” (J. Hartsock, A History 169). Hartsock notes, too, that the failing of many newspapers to report on the realities of the Great Depression as it set in in the early 1930s led to a general distrust of newspapers and further opened the door for magazines and, by extension, literary journalism. This set of circumstances marks a convergence between the rapid social change and the rapid media change theories of the history of literary journalism. To be sure, the Great Depression represents one of those moments that challenged the objective model of journalism and seemed to necessitate a more subjective journalism that sought to understand the plight of others. For this reason, as Hartsock points out, a subjective journalism often aligned with progressive politics. Newspapers were by this point wedded to objectivity and an understanding of journalism as a science, which precluded newspaper writers from engaging their subjectivities. Not so for magazines, however, where writers were more free to write their subjectivities into their reporting and where the emerging genre of photojournalism could be paired with reporting to further engage the subjectivities of readers. The Great Depression, then, is a model for how periods of rapid social change create the necessity for literary journalism, and emerging media provide the platform for it.
As a reporter, Martha Gellhorn was no stranger to the Great Depression, and particularly the need to go beyond objective reporting to cover it. After two years spent in France as a correspondent for United Press, Gellhorn returned to the United States and was hired by Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s close advisor and federal relief administrator Harry Hopkins to be a field investigator for the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA). In this capacity, she travelled the country and reported on the impact of the Great Depression. Though none of this reporting was published contemporaneously in a newspaper or magazine, Gellhorn used her reporting as the basis for her semi-fictional collection of novellas, *The Trouble I’ve Seen* (1936). After working for FERA, Gellhorn went abroad once again—this time to Spain to cover the Spanish Civil War and then, later, the outbreak of World War II across Europe, for *Collier’s Weekly*. Gellhorn is ever-present in her reporting in *Collier’s*, detailing what she is seeing and thinking as bombs fall around her in “Only the Shells Whine” or as she describes the apprehension she senses among Swedes as they anticipate entering World War II in “Fear Comes to Sweden.” The *Collier’s* articles are accompanied by photographs that further bring the harsh war-time realities that Gellhorn is describing to readers.

Though perhaps less dramatic than the decade of hardships brought on by the Great Depression or the foreboding events that led to World War II, the intervening decade—the 1920s—brought its own social change to which women magazine writers were well suited to respond. In 1917, prohibition became law in the form of the Eighteenth Amendment to the Constitution, in large part due to the efforts of women’s movements like The Women’s Crusade and Women’s Christian Temperance Union, and was followed three years later by the Nineteenth
Amendment, which gave women the right to vote. And, again, magazines provided the ideal outlet for women’s voices. Though by the turn of the century women reporters were common—often imitating the stunt journalism of Nellie Bly or writing for “society” pages in newspapers—the turn toward objectivity once again limited the options for women journalists. Objective, fact-based journalism was largely associated with male writers and its adoption served as a way to push women writers out of the newsroom and relegate them to writing about “women’s interests.” Magazines, on the other hand, provided a space where, according to Angela Weaver, women writers could both “critique and reinforce social norms” (Weaver 26). Weaver’s particular subject is Dorothy Parker’s writing in *Vogue, Vanity Fair,* and *Ladies’ Home Journal*—where, Weaver points out, Parker marketed herself as a “journalist-observer.” Weaver broadens her scope beyond Parker, however, to consider the way women writers influenced culture by way of popular magazines: “magazines changed the way Americans did business and the way people understood work, family, and gender. At the center of these changes were dozens and dozens of female writers like Parker vying for publication opportunities in one of the only venues open to them—popular magazines” (Weaver 26). Whether the subject was social changes or the Great Depression at home, or war abroad, magazines provided an unprecedented outlet for women’s subjectivities. It is no coincidence that magazines became the de facto home of literary journalism in the twentieth century, much of which was written by women.

The heyday of general interest magazines would last until the middle of the twentieth century when another emerging media, television, would reshape magazine publishing once again.
Special Interest Magazines

By all accounts, when televisions landed in the living rooms of nearly all Americans through the 1950s and 60s, many commenters believed it would spell the end for the magazine press—perhaps for the periodical press as a whole. TV had everything: news, entertainment, sports, and more. Peterson writes that the number of television sets and stations “grew so fast after World War II that statistics…were outdated before they could be compiled” (Peterson 47). Estimates suggest that by 1955 “about 68 per cent of American households” had televisions, according to Peterson (Peterson 47). Given what we’ve seen of emerging media in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, however, perhaps it will not in fact be all that surprising that television, rather than dooming magazines, led to a reconfiguration of the medium and ultimately to its exponential growth. David E. Sumner identifies five influential magazines that debuted in the 1950s that “symbolized the overall thrust of American magazines for the next fifty years”—TV Guide, Sports Illustrated, Playboy, Mad, and National Enquirer (Sumner 117). These five magazines, Sumner writes, “paved the way for hundreds more like them that were to reach the largest market of magazine readers in history” (Sumner 118). What these magazines symbolize is the rise of the special interest magazine. Television, then, took the place of the general interest magazine and legacy magazines reconfigured themselves as the market flooded with newcomers. Here, we clearly see the cyclical relationship between social change and media change. The media change that television introduced deeply affected people’s habits and interests in concert with other (and important) forms of cultural upheaval present in the 1960s and 70s,
and magazines—here a legacy media—adapted to the new media environment by embracing social change. Taken together, this situation, as we’ve seen in the previous periods, leads to the next wave of literary journalism.

With the advent of special interest magazines, suddenly readers could find a periodical that addressed nearly any particular interest or hobby. “If a publisher found a sufficient number of persons with interests in common, especially persons whom advertisers would pay to reach, he felt justified in bringing out a magazine for them,” Peterson writes (Peterson). A survey of some of the titles released in the 1950s and 60s makes this clear. To those listed above, we can add: *Car & Driver, Bon Appétit, Guns Magazine, Boating, AARP: The Magazine, Christianity Today, Golf Magazine, Rolling Stone, The Advocate, New York, Southern Living*, and so on. At the same time, magazines that had been around longer, such as *Esquire* and *The New Yorker*, among others, retooled their formula to keep up with the flurry of competition. Significantly, an effect of the splintering of readers into special interests was that magazines could develop a style and voice more suited to their particular audience. Jean Chance and William McKeen write, “Rather than being the stuff of tragedy, the coming of TV was the beginning of a liberation for journalism…Magazines were able to take risks. Without the responsibility (and the burden) of serving a mass audience, they could project strong personalities” (Chance and McKeen x).

Indeed, “personality” is an excellent marker of post-war special interest magazines, and it is from this personality that the next major phase of literary journalism arose—the so-called “New Journalism.”
While the tumult of the 1960s and early 70s was the subject of the New Journalism, magazines formed the stage on which the New Journalism was performed. And it was a kind of performance, perhaps more so than any other period in the history of literary journalism. The writers of the era, and their outsized personalities, are remembered perhaps even more vividly than their work. While immersion and first-person accounts have always been important aspects of the genre, the New Journalists took this to new heights. Morris Dickstein calls this a “new subjectivity,” and notes that though there was a trivial side to it—“the mere impulse to self-display”—it also created opportunities for reporters to be more honest about her or his subjectivity. Dickstein writes, “In the fifties he was obliged to distance himself from his subject, distance it through form, through an effort of style, distance it by proving…that he was not an interested party. But the literature of the sixties—quite as much as the politics of the sixties—assumed that everyone was an interested party” (Dickstein 863). The tumult of the 1960s and 70s posed a challenge to the objective, disinterested model of journalism that had taken hold. As Hartsock writes, in such times, objectivity tends to break down. While newspapers widely carried on the objective models, magazines had long since loosed themselves of its strictures and provided a platform for New Journalists who engaged their own subjectivities in pursuit of an understanding of the events of the era.

The New Journalism is all too often associated with the strong masculine personalities of some of the writers of the era (think Tom Wolfe, Norman Mailer, Hunter S. Thompson), and yet it is during the era of the New Journalism that Joan Didion emerged as probably the most recognizable woman literary journalists of all time. Nicolaus Mills observes that much writing by
women New Journalists “explores primarily the process of women realizing collectively and individually the nature of their experiences in a society where ‘masculine’ values pervade everything from psychoanalysis to the ideal of a family” (Mills 356). Special interest magazines, with their invitation for writers and readers to be interested parties and to say and write what would not be acceptable in general market magazines or on television, afforded women writers the platform to push back against the masculine values that dominated. Sara Davidson, who came late to the New Journalism, seized the opportunity to be “an interested party” and to get close to her subjects in the articles she wrote for The Atlantic, Esquire, Harper’s, Rolling Stone, and others, as well as in her books. Davidson is an ever-present guide to her readers as she explores topics ranging from personal relationships, social change, and life’s transitions. But it’s never just about her; Jan Whitt writes, “Davidson’s foray into self-discovery is also a foray into the heart of American culture” (Whitt 63). Self-discovery wasn’t a viable option for writers in general interest magazines, nor were there venues for that kind of writing on television, but the niche magazines of the 1960s and 70s, with their emphasis on voice and interested parties, made this more intentionally personal manifestation of literary journalism possible.

Thus, the New Journalism, of which Davidson was a part and then outlived, was made possible by the splintering of the magazine industry from general to special interests, which, in turn, was made possible by the advent of television. This line continues back, perhaps, to cave writings. Emerging media confronts legacy media with an ultimatum: adapt or die. And while many do die along the way, enough stick around so that the venues we have for consuming
culture continue to grow. This is true, even, of the internet, supposed harbinger of death for all that came before.

**The Internet**

It’s always difficult, from within a particular moment in time, to hypothesize about what led to this moment. There is no question that we are in the midst of another prolific period of literary journalism, and so it follows that a confluence of social changes and media changes have brought us here. The media change part of the equation is not so difficult to determine—cable news and then the internet have had well-documented, revolutionary effects on just about every aspect of contemporary life. And certainly, with an eye toward the cyclical relationship between social change and media change, many of the social changes we have recently experienced or are experiencing are in some way spurred by the internet. There could be no dot-com bubble in the late 1990s, of course, without the dot-com. The rise of organized terror networks that span continents relies, in part, on the internet and social media. And, most recently, social media is linked to the hacking of the 2016 presidential elections. And that’s to say nothing about the way Twitter, in particular, is now used by the current president to announce policy and issue threats to foreign powers. More so than any period detailed in this study, the relationship between social change and media change is nearly indecipherable. In *Understanding Media*, Marshall McLuhan writes, “the ‘message’ of any medium or technology is the change of scale or pace or pattern that it introduces into human affairs” (McLuhan 8). When once McLuhan’s oft-quoted aphorism “the
medium is the message” might’ve seemed more confusing than helpful, today it feels clearer than ever.

Print media was perceived to be under attack for decades before the internet arrived. In the 1980s and 90s, cable news debuted and the 24-hour news cycle was born. Combining high entertainment value with a news magazine style of reporting, networks like CNN, which premiered in 1980, and later Fox News in 1996, captured the lion share of Americans’ attention when it came to news consumption. Cable news led the print industry to adapt—USA Today, known for short articles and an emphasis on visuals, debuted in 1982. Likewise, as internet use spread toward the end of the 1990s and into the 2000s, it reshaped the media landscape, but did not render any previous medium obsolete.

In his 1985 book *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*, Neil Postman lamented the way that television, as a medium, transformed all content into entertainment. “American television,” he writes, “is devoted entirely to supplying its audience with entertainment” (Postman Kindle Location 1495). Postman addresses television news specifically; when watching TV news, he argues, “we know that the ‘news’ is not to be taken seriously, that it is all in fun” (Kindle Locations 1506-1507). There’s a certain conservatism to Postman’s argument, and similar arguments have been made about every form of emerging media—recall Mathew Arnold’s criticism of the “new journalism” of the nineteenth century as “feather-brained.” But, in the case of television news, Postman’s complaint has proven increasingly true. And while Postman’s argument about television has been echoed in criticisms of the internet, the internet’s heterogeneity inoculates it from such totalizing accusations.
With the rise of the internet as the primary medium through which many Americans disseminate and consume information at the turn of the century, some, such as Nicholas Carr, feared that attention spans would become shorter and our ability to plumb the depths of what we read would be severely hindered. In his 2011 book *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains*, Carr writes, “The net seems to be chipping away my capacity for concentration and contemplation” (Carr 6). He moves outside of himself to include others who he has talked to and cites some studies that suggest his thesis, that the internet is rewiring our brains. “For some people,” Carr writes, “the very idea of reading a book has come to seem old-fashioned, maybe even a little bit silly—like sewing your own shirts or butchering your own meat” (Carr 8). And yet, it turns out, people are still reading (and, I’m told, butchering one’s own meat is actually mounting something of a comeback!) and, ironically, the internet has incubated a proliferation of what has come to be called “longform” writing, or journalism that delves deeper into a story than a traditional news article.

At a conference hosted by Columbia University’s Tow Center for Digital Journalism called “The Future of Digital Longform” in 2013, the newfound popularity of longform stories was discussed and, according to the *Columbia Journalism Review (CJR)*, “One point of agreement throughout the day was that longform, though experiencing a new jump in popularity, is not at all a new form of writing” (Sharp). Longform, is, in fact, just the latest manifestation of what has long been called literary journalism. Joshua Roiland writes, “the style of writing now popularly called longform has an extended yet overlooked history, as do the debates over what to call it” (Roiland 3). As we’ve seen with previous manifestations of literary journalism over its
nearly 200-year history, it is perpetually reintroduced to the public under different monikers—new journalism, muckraking, reportage, new journalism again, new new journalism, and now longform.

That literary journalism found a home on the internet surprised some. In the late 1990s and into the 2000s, the assumption, as Nicholas Carr makes clear, was that the internet was best for short bursts of information, not for sustained reading. Even Norman Sims, writing in 2011, was skeptical, though hopeful, that literary journalism would move online. He writes, “It may come to pass that we will figure out how to read long pieces of literary journalism on the computer screen. Right now, we don’t” (Sims, “The Evolutionary Future” 88). He goes on to cite statistics, widely circulated at the time though never quite agreed upon, about just how much a person will read on a screen—“three computer screens” in length, he suggests. But Sims knows enough about the history of literary journalism and its relationship to emerging media to remain hopeful, “The form flourishes on new beginnings and at the margins of the marketplace,” he writes before concluding, “In the future—who can predict?—we might find a way to read literary journalism on the Web or on new digital e-books” (Sims, “The Evolutionary Future” 88). Indeed, we’ve done just that.

“New digital e-books,” as Sims refers to them—and the platform on which they’re read, e-readers—are certainly responsible for an increase in reading longer works on screens, but more importantly, smart phones and tablets—the iPad was released in 2010, a year before Sims’ article was published—made reading on screens ubiquitous. As for e-readers, there was a short-lived crazed for short e-books, Amazon branded them “Kindle Singles”, which seems to have withered
a bit as the excitement over e-readers subsided. So, literary journalism has surged once again as a result of an emerging medium that provides new opportunities for writers to tell their stories and for readers to read, share, and, increasingly, interact with them. Upstart platforms like Medium, Atavist, Longreads, and Longform, which produce original content and aggregate stories from other sources, join legacy publications that are exploring innovative ways to produce literary journalism for the web and tablet, such as a form that is sometimes referred to as long-form multimedia journalism. Introduced to most readers by the December 2012 New York Times article “Snow Fall: The Avalanche at Tunnel Creek” by John Branch, long-form multimedia journalism combines multimedia, interactive images, animations, and 3D maps to further immerse readers in stories. “Snow Fall” went on to win both a Peabody Award in 2012 and the Pulitzer Prize in 2013. In an article published in Digital Journalism, David Dowling and Travis Vogan write that “Snow Fall,” “reinvented the template for digital longform articles designed for the tablet and inspired other media outlets to create similar products” (Dowling and Vogan). Their article’s title turns “Snow Fall” into a verb describing the tendency to replicate the original, “Can We ‘Snow Fall’ This?”

The New York Times continues to “snow fall” stories, including in “The Russia Left Behind: A journey through a heartland on the slow road to ruin,” by Pulitzer Prize winning journalist Ellen Barry. In a series of seven linked sketches—of the kind one might expect to read in a late nineteenth century newspaper—Barry’s story of driving from St. Petersburg to Moscow details the life lived by many Russians outside the major cities. Along the way, she encounters Mariuka, a 14-year-old gypsy, on her wedding day. Mariuka, according to a guest at the wedding,
was “on the verge of becoming an unusual, startling beauty,” which is why her family decided to marry her off. The wedding guest tells Barry that the wedding is a precaution, “So that, as he put it, ‘she would not start messing around’” (Barry). Barry notes that since the collapse of the Soviet Union, children are no longer required to attend school, and as many as forty percent do not. Barry writes, “The vacuum has allowed the tradition of child marriage to come roaring back” (Barry). Other vignettes in “The Russia Left Behind” detail a traffic jam that lasts for 70 miles, a pristine seventeenth century monastery, out of place in its ruined village but in the direct line of sight of one of Vladimir Putin’s vacation homes, and the shrinking and eventual disappearance of small villages in Russia’s countryside—“Moscow and St. Petersburg act as giant vacuum cleaners, sucking people and capital from the rest of the country,” Barry writes (Barry).

As far as the “multimedia” aspect of “The Russia Left Behind,” it’s relatively sparse as compared to other examples of long-form multimedia journalism. The story opens with a full-page image depicting a woman standing before the monastery described within. Upon scrolling, the image gives way to a large map with an overview of the route Barry took from St. Petersburg to Moscow. The text follows, set to the side of a stripped-down map, which also serves as a table of contents for the seven vignettes. Each vignette is accompanied by photographs and videos. That is to say, as is the case with many excellent pieces of long-form multimedia journalism, the multimedia adds to rather than detracts from—or, perhaps more damningly, distracts from—the story. Dowling and Vogel, in their study of “Snow Fall,” note the similarities between what they (more succinctly) call “digital longform” and the 1960s New Journalism, particularly in the way
digital longform came about in response to technological change: “In both cases, longer more expressive forms of journalism paradoxically emerged out of technologies reputed to truncate and radically abridge.” (Dowling and Vogan). Indeed where once the expectation was that the internet would necessarily shorten readers’ attention spans and eliminate their desire for long, immersive stories, the opposite has proved true.

In the years since the emergence of long-form multimedia journalism, new technologies and media innovations proliferate at a faster rate than ever before, such that the next new media may already be on the horizon. In September 2017, the Associated Press released a report on its experiments with what the report calls “dynamic storytelling,” using 3-D imaging and virtual reality technology to provide “more interactive experience rather than being told from a single, fixed perspective” (Francesco Marconi and Taylor Nakagawa 1). Indeed, the merging of media—textual, visual, auditory, and interactive—may be the most innovative development the internet has afforded us. And literary journalists are embracing this panoply. Today, as in previous prolific eras of literary journalism, social change provides the content for stories, but equally important (or, McLuhan would say, more important) are the media changes that provide new opportunities for storytelling and innovative methods to do so. Indeed, literary journalistic pieces have been written about the dot-com bubble, the financial crisis of 2008, and the spread of terrorism networks online without the multimedia affordances of the internet, and for literary journalism, the text remains central. But the fact that literary journalism is experiencing a period of widespread popularity is undoubtedly linked to the rise of the internet as the primary medium for journalism. Whether stories are presented using multimedia or virtual reality, or if they are
told in more traditional ways on the myriad of websites that publish and aggregate literary journalism, technological advances like the internet, mobile phones, and tablets inaugurated significant and rapid media shifts leading to this current prolific period.

While it’s true that length has become a hallmark of literary journalism over the course of the twentieth century, thanks in part to magazines’ embrace of the genre, let us return to InstaEssays, another form of literary journalism gaining traction in the era of social media.

**Instagram Journalism**

As the Viral Texts Project\(^\text{15}\) has shown, the practice of reprinting in the nineteenth century periodical press bears many similarities to what we’d call “sharing” on social media today. And indeed, as the project name suggests, just as articles, blog posts, or videos that spread rapidly online are said to “go viral,” so too did items in the nineteenth century. Ryan Cordell, primary investigator of the Viral Texts Project writes, “Like some viral content online today, which can become noteworthy because of its virality, the system of newspaper exchanges produced a kind of feedback loop, in which texts circulated because of their perceived value to readers, while that perceived value was frequently tied to a given piece’s wide circulation” (Cordell 418). In a media environment that harkens back to the nineteenth century, it is perhaps not surprising that a nineteenth century genre like the sketch has re-emerged, however reinvented given the affordances of internet technology. Chief among these affordances, for a platform like Instagram, is the focus on images. When combined with short sketches in InstaEssays, the combination

\(^{15}\) [http://www.viraltexts.org](http://www.viraltexts.org)
provides another way for readers to see the author’s subject. As shown throughout, seeing is central to the power of literary journalism, from its sentimental roots in the nineteenth century and onward. InstaEssays provide an immediate and often intimate image that enhance the author’s efforts to enable readers to see her subject.

Blair Braverman has been composing InstaEssays since 2014, shortly after Sharlet—a friend of Braverman’s—began experimenting in the form. Braverman is the author of *Welcome to the Goddamn Ice Cube: Chasing Fear and Finding Home in the Great White North*, which details her experiences moving to Norway to learn to drive dog sleds. Her Instagram account provides a kind of behind the scenes look at the stories detailed in her memoir. In September, 2014, she posted her first InstaEssay, a short profile of a seal hunter in Norway accompanied by a photograph of the young man lifting a piece of bloodied seal meat out of a barrel of salt water. While most of her subjects are people, many of her pieces prominently feature animals—including her sled dogs—and arctic landscapes. Often, Braverman lets her subjects tell their own stories as she posts long quotes in lieu of a narrative. Regardless of how she does it, Braverman’s work brings to life remote places and the people that inhabit them.

In December 2015, InstaEssays took on a new level of professionalism when the *Virginia Quarterly Review* began a series called #VQRTrueStory, which the magazine describes as “a social-media experiment in nonfiction” (#VQRTrueStory). The series features the work of a number of InstaEssayist who take control of the magazine’s Instagram account and post pictures and stories. Then, in each issue of the print magazine, a selection of the #VQRTrueStory...
pieces are published. Laura Kasinoff, a freelance journalist and author of Don’t Be Afraid of the Bullets: An Accidental War Correspondent in Yemen about her time covering the Arab Spring for The New York Times, has been featured twice on #VQRTrueStory with works describing traditional healers’ attempts to take on the AIDS epidemic in Lesotho and refugees in Berlin coming to terms with that label. In the latter story, which was funded by the Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting, Kasinoff’s words accompany photography by Alex Potter, a photographer and journalist. The pairing is evocative; the images are not portraits as many InstaEssays feature, but rather they illustrate a theme. The first piece in the series titled “Farhad”—InstaEssay don’t typically have titles, but when published in Virginia Quarterly Review they are often assigned titles—centers around the concept of freedom and is accompanied by an image of an airplane’s trail cutting a line across an almost all-blue sky. The third piece, which describes the agony of waiting that asylum seekers must grow accustomed to, is accompanied by a close up of a man’s hands folded restlessly in his lap. Taken together, Kasinoff’s InstaEssays allow readers to see, through words and images, the plight of the people living with disease and without homes.

In the years since the first InstaEssays began showing up on Instagram, the form has caught on in part through the attention the early practitioners received and the subsequent feature in Virginia Quarterly Review, and also through the success of some whose work on Instagram does not trace its roots to the 2014 rise of InstaEssays. The most famous example is Brandon Stanton, the photographer behind the popular “Humans of New York,” which, according to

17 http://www.vqronline.org/2016/01/hope-sale
Stanton, “began as a photography project in 2010”. Indeed even traditional publications like The New York Times and National Geographic are using Instagram as a way to tell stories. Often they publish excerpts from articles or teasers for online content alongside a picture, of course. Though, like “Humans of New York,” they don’t name it as such, they spread the InstaEssay form to millions of readers. Early attempts—mine and others—to identify, gather, and name works of Instagram journalism have been outpaced by the incredible rate at which they proliferate. In the span of three years, what once seemed new and innovative now seems commonplace; just another way to tell a story.

Instagram journalism is just one of the new forms of literary journalism emerging in our rapidly shifting media landscape. Times of rapid social change certainly play a part in proliferations of literary journalism, but just as important and inextricable from social change are the media platforms available. Ultimately, literary journalism continues to thrive because it gets at the basic human desire—perhaps need—to tell stories about the world we live in. These stories are true in many senses of the word; true to the events or people they describe as well as true to the experience of being human. Literary journalists—men and women alike—will continue to tell their true stories, no matter the medium, and in so doing they will continue to help us better understand the world we live in and each other. In so doing, by working to narrow the ever widening gap between the distinct subjective of readers, authors, and their subjects, literary journalists press forward toward that impossible goal of truly understanding the other.

http://humansofnewyork.com

19


Burt, Elizabeth V. “From ‘True Woman’ to ‘New Woman.’” *Journalism History*, vol. 37, no. 4, Winter 2012, pp. 207–17.


Greeley-Smith, Nixola. “‘The Vivisection of a Woman’s Soul,’ Nixola Greeley-Smith Calls District-Attorney Jerome’s Cross-Examination of Evelyn Thaw.” The Evening World, 22 Feb. 1907, p. 3.


Hartsock, John C. “Note From the Editor.” Literary Journalism Studies, vol. 1, no. 1, Spring 2009, p. 5.


Williams, Catherine Read. *Fall River: An Authentic Narrative*. Lilly, Wait & Company, 1834.

