

1 Reportage and Mediation

1.1 The Complications of ‘Literary Journalism’

Mapping out the theoretical terrain of literary texts most explicitly concerned with the representation of reality—a kind of nonfictional realism—is a complex endeavor. Any theory of such a genre must simultaneously acknowledge the texts’ grounding in documentary authorial intention and experiential materiality, as well as the eventual product’s very formal, textual character. This multidisciplinary complexity might have been one of the reasons that pushed Barbara Lounsberry to argue that such literature was “the great unexplored territory of contemporary criticism” in 1990.¹ The critical conversation around such texts has shifted noticeably in the thirty years since Lounsberry’s book. Literary journalism has become established as a useful point of reference for issues of genre, in addition to assuming the status of an academic discipline in its own right. On the institutional level, this has led to an increase in scholarly work on literary journalism, while the emergence of literary journalism has imposed terminological unity on a rather fractured landscape, on the level of actual critical theory.

However, this unification has occurred in broadly general, predominantly formal, terms. The term “literary journalism” initially surfaced in the U.S. as a way of referring to a kind of journalism more akin to realist novels than to traditional news media.² The term can be traced back as far as 1907, to the anonymous “Confessions of ‘a Literary Journalist,’” whose author draws a contrast

1 Lounsberry, *The Art of Fact: Contemporary Artists of Nonfiction*, xi.

2 In 1905, Hutchins Hapgood, an early proponent of the idea of a more literary kind of journalism, suggested turning the journalistic interview into a form of autobiography. He found that a real character could be turned into a type representing a certain social class, which would make for vital literature. Thus, he fused Marxist ideas about literary realism with journalistic methods. However, he did not yet use the term literary journalism. Hapgood, “A New Form of Literature.”