

Fieldwork Literature, Created Lives: George Packer and Claudia Rankine

- 1 The focus of this essay will be on two contemporary writers, George Packer and Claudia Rankine, who conjoin narrative experimentation with a “realistic,” documentary, multi-genre and multi-media mode that has important ramifications for fieldwork literature. This certain blending of a realist accounting with non-realistic forms and a blurring of “high” art and “mass culture” has a long tradition in American writing¹. I begin with the much less experimental of the two, Packer, an American journalist, novelist, and playwright, praised for his essays in *The New Yorker*, but perhaps best known for his literary-journalistic *The Unwinding* (2013), which won the National Book Award for Nonfiction in 2013. I start with *The Unwinding* because I think it aptly illustrates both a classic reporting on what Packer describes as America becoming “irretrievably different”² and an indebtedness to a 1930s documentary-modernist aesthetic, of which John Dos Passos’s *U.S.A.* trilogy (1938) was a crowning achievement³. And then I discuss the work of Claudia Rankine, poet, essayist, playwright, and editor of several anthologies. My argument is based on her book-length poem, *Citizen* (2014), which has received a considerable amount of media and critical coverage, especially in light of the national demonstrations over the Michael Brown and Eric Gardner cases. *Citizen* alternates prose poems with images and essays while showing the interrelationship between contemporary content and experimental form. Both of these texts create a disorienting experience (e.g., an irrevocable social “unwinding”; a racially induced “anger built up through experience”⁴), one that, in many respects, attempts to mirror the experience of living in the United States in the 21st-century.
- 2 In an intermixed way, the practice and ontology of “fieldwork literature” and literary journalism⁵ crucially inform *The Unwinding* and *Citizen*. Dominique Viart defines fieldwork literature as a literature that goes beyond mere observation to envision narrative forms “as a means of testing, studying, even experimenting with [the real].” In the process, these “texts invent undecidable forms, irreducible to the novel recognized as a genre of narrative fiction, or to the essay as a literary genre of discourse; they open a new literary space in an interesting proximity to the Humanities and Social Sciences”⁶. I define literary journalism as a narrative form that combines the reportorial and truth-telling covenants of traditional journalism⁷ with techniques most commonly associated with fiction and certain forms of poetry⁸. Congruent with many of the current tendencies in Francophone literary journalism, evidenced, for example, in the work of Annie Ernaux, François Bon, and Emmanuel Carrère, *The Unwinding* and *Citizen* enter social conflict by pitting the past and present against each other. In presenting the material world, these texts find forms to challenge the ways that world is perceived and thus demand more than a mere non-fiction or literary/poetic apprehension.
- 3 To be clear, both fieldwork literature and literary journalism concern “heuristic processes that involve the effective integration of the writer in the ‘field’ about which he or she writes”⁹; both can involve such field and journalistic practices as investigations, interviews, archival work, immersion, witnessing, first-person accounts, and encounters between literature and the disciplines of sociology, ethnography, and history; both tend to focus on an investigation of the everyday; and both resist separating lived experience from scientific or journalistic conclusions.

- 4 George Packer's and Claudia Rankine's literary journalism can be seen as a form or adaptation of fieldwork literature¹⁰ because of an emphasis on: 1. engaging directly with communities and everyday lives the authors are trying to better comprehend. Lived experience is their primary focus; 2. analyzing and presenting cultural and racial practices as responses to environment or economic conditions; 3. recognizing that direct contact is essential to understanding the meanings people make in their words and actions, beliefs, and ideational social structures; 4. emphasizing participant observation, direct formal interviews, development of interpersonal relationships with interlocutors from a given community; and 5. creating what Viart calls an "interstitial text" that holds "a place between two cognitively distinct sets," fiction and nonfiction, and results in a double "heuristic dimension": "[o]ne part insists, strictly speaking, on the investigation in the field whose devices tell the tale; the other on the textual work itself, on the heuristic form adopted by the narrative"¹¹.
- 5 As we shall see, Packer and Rankine employ techniques of journalism and ethnography in their respective accounts but also provide implicit and explicit heuristics and theories of social and racial relations. Much of the journalistic fieldwork in *The Unwinding*, for example, comes from "hundreds of hours of interviews with the people whose stories it tells...supplemented by written sources" (UU 431). While foregrounding various "micro-aggressions," defined as the intrusion of implicit (and some explicit) incidents of racism, *Citizen* draws on the author's own experience and that of friends that she informally interviewed, a process Rankine calls a "loose anthropological exercise"¹². Cast entirely in the present, *Citizen* blends images and essays with a rather flat dispassionate "lyrical" prose. Rankine's subjects are both historical and present; she creates a fieldwork literature that does not simply confront alterity but rather *becomes it*: instead of merely recording stories, she rather channels and embodies them.
- 6 In this regard, as my discussion of *The Unwinding* and *Citizen* will show, there is a case to be made for experimental narratives in which facts cannot speak for themselves and innocent objectivity of factual assertions is impossible. Insofar as experimental literary-journalistic texts and literary-fieldwork texts¹³ exhibit such qualities and can be interpreted as both analogous to a reader's perceptual experience and to his or her historical experience, we have important narrative forms to contend with. To be sure, coming to interpretive terms with forms that depart from realist practices—and contemporary literary-journalistic texts are increasingly doing so—has become a challenge (but also a necessity) for both of these genres.
- 7 Experimental literary journalistic and literary fieldwork texts are amazingly diverse¹⁴. Perhaps the one common feature that all such texts share is their tendency to raise fundamental questions about the very nature and being of narrative. Often process oriented, such texts value the experience of *making* over the final thing *made* while aiming to involve the reader's collaboration in the narrative production. Thus the reader's navigation of experimental possibilities: for example, associating the experimental with a decentering of subjectivity and a crossing of traditional and nation-based boundaries must be more fully acknowledged.
- 8 My argument is that these two writers emblemize the need for an international literary journalism and its literary-fieldwork components to go beyond a realist aesthetic/mode and to envision alternative narrative lineages. Pertinent to both US and French literary journalism histories and practices, *The Unwinding* and *Citizen* encourage a shift in interpretive attention from an explanation of how the form functions in relation to

national culture and into analyses that move beyond the nation and national categories. In this connection, the distinguishing mark of Packer's and Rankine's work is that both writers (though to a lesser degree, Packer) resist the fact/fiction opposition¹⁵ in such a way that the documentary mode, best understood through transnational coordinates and connections, becomes virtually indistinguishable from modes of new or experimental fiction. Both writers help reveal the ambivalence of a "realist" social representation and a documentary-modernist erosion of this representation. Their works I discuss here are examples of experimentation that express the possibilities, capacities, pitfalls and limitations of human agency, particularly as this agency relates to failed social institutions, racism, and social inequities—abiding concerns for both writers.

George Packer

- 9 Packer's literary-journalistic fieldwork literature freely borrows from the experimental techniques and narrative structures of Dos Passos's iconic *U.S.A.* trilogy. As Packer stated in a 2013 interview, "I originally went to [*U.S.A.*] as a formal tool. More like as a lifeline. I didn't know how to create a structure. There was no book that gave me a model, I didn't have one in my head. I had a ton of material and a notion of telling this big historical story"¹⁶. With its "newsreels," "biographies," "camera eyes," and character narratives, the trilogy provided a template for Packer to navigate both the individual lives of his characters and to record the "big historical events" (Langbein). Packer's intention was to create, in his words, a "whole new kind of narrative form"—one of epic proportions in which "history matters" (Langbein).
- 10 But most reviews of the book have overlooked its experimental and formal qualities, emphasizing instead its journalistic qualities and its realistic mode. As Christopher Wilson astutely argues, "sympathetic to Packer's politics or not, all but a few commentators on *The Unwinding* preferred to approach a work of nonfiction in terms of 'content,' and thus to base their reviews on Packer's prior reputation as a liberal commentator rather than on his work as a novelist and playwright"¹⁷. Indeed, as the critical reception of *The Unwinding* illustrates, "public reviewing" continues "to fall back on commonsense and largely empiricist notions of representation that still dominate the mainstream journalism" (Wilson).
- 11 Significantly, these prevailing journalistic attitudes, can also be seen in some of the public (and academic) re-evaluations of *U.S.A.*¹⁸ Take, for instance, Ted Giola's assessment in the *The Los Angeles Times* of *U.S.A.* as a "supposed masterpiece." After conceding that Dos Passos worked hard "to construct a literary work that would meet all the requirements of the Great American novel, Giola chastises Dos Passos's experimental techniques: "He...tosses in hundreds of newspaper headlines, fragments of news stories, song lyrics, and other cultural bric-à-brac into this mosaic of a text. Like the potted biographies, these disruptive bumps in the reader's way have no bearing on the story"¹⁹. Douglas Brinkley's 2003 re-evaluation of the novel for *The New York Times* comes to a similar conclusion: "if Dos Passos' experimental complexities are responsible for his powerful prose, they are also responsible for his eclipse from the popular imagination. "*U.S.A.*" offers no memorable characters like Jay Gatsby or Nick Adams, and it's an utterly despairing book"²⁰. In another assessment, the reviewer, drawing many of his conclusions from what he sees as Dos Passos's failed experimentations

- (“The ‘Camera Eyes,’ which once seemed far out, now appear overripe and pretentious, characterized by an irritating absence of punctuation, jammed-together words”) condemns the novel as “labored, in its best places no more than a ‘good try’”²¹.
- 12 Corresponding to some of the mainstream media’s retrospective conclusions about *U.S.A.*, the aesthetic objectives of *The Unwinding*—especially for many public reviewers (literary critics have paid virtually no attention to the text)—can appear as nothing less than inconsequential. And yet in *The Unwinding*, Packer, in his words, deliberately intended “to tell the story through narratives. I needed to use the tools of a novelist, not of a policy analyst”²². It is the story, “the literary narrative” and its stylistic experimentations, that foremost matter to Packer²³. In this regard, reflecting *U.S.A.*’s credo that the United States is the “speech of the people,”²⁴ Packer’s fieldwork focuses on diverse individual destinies and *voices*. As he states in the book’s “Prologue,” “in the unwinding, everything changes and nothing lasts, except for the voices, American voices, open, sentimental, angry, matter-of-fact; inflected with borrowed ideas, God, TV, and the dimly remembered past...” (*U 4*).
- 13 *The Unwinding* chronicles the last three decades of American socioeconomic and political decline through personal or “inner” histories of a Youngstown, Ohio factory worker turned activist, Tammy Thomas; a Washington political operative, Jeff Connaughton; a North Carolinian small businessman, Dean Price; and an internet billionaire, Peter Thiel. These characters are the individualized products and victims of Packer’s “outer history” represented, for example, by such cultural celebrities as Oprah Winfrey (“Her Own: Oprah Winfrey”) and Sam Walton (“Mr. Sam: Sam Walton”), but also social forces, “Wall Street,” and representative places, “Silicon Valley” and “Tampa,” an epicenter of the housing collapse. Similar to Dos Passos’s *U.S.A.* “newsreels,” Packer’s 21st-century “newsreels”—montages of newspaper headlines, broadcast reports, political quotations, and tabloid news—serve as chronological markers and ironic social commentary. Both writers attempt to capture the full sweep of a thirty-year time period: Dos Passos’s narrative runs from the turn of the 20th century through the execution of Sacco and Vanzetti in 1927; Packer narrates the period from 1978 to early 2013. Although it can be argued that “most of [*The Unwinding*]...is composed in the most economical, detached *New Yorker* prose”²⁵, Packer’s text is anything but detached. As suggested in the subtitle, “an inner history of the new America,” Packer’s intention, similar to Dos Passos’s agenda in *U.S.A.*, is to offer an alternative and hidden history²⁶.
- 14 *The Unwinding*’s irreducible stylistic experimentations—though off the radar of most interpretations of the book—are essential for charting this history. Like *U.S.A.*, *The Unwinding* is not plot-driven, nor is it character driven, in any conventional sense. No single individual is the subject. Most of the chapters are labeled after a particular character; each chapter deploys a traditional omniscient or semi-omniscient third-person narrator, but creates a fractured and fragmented narrative through its cut-up, discontinuous, and open structure. The biographies of *The Unwinding*—Newt Gingrich, Oprah Winfrey, Raymond Carver, Sam Walton, Colin Powell, Alice Waters, Robert Rubin, Jay-Z, Andrew Breitbart, and Elizabeth Warren—represent the ideological heterogeneity and diversity of 20th- and 21st-century American culture. But in them, following Dos Passos, Packer adopts the idioms, tones, and speech patterns of his subjects. In the biography “Craftsman: Raymond Carver,” for instance, the narrator mimics the idiom and tone of a typical Carver short story: “Ray wanted to write a novel. But a man who was trying to wash six loads of clothes in a Laundromat while his wife

was serving food somewhere and the kids were waiting for him to come pick them up somewhere else and it was getting late and the woman ahead of him kept putting more dimes in the dryer..." (U 72). *The Unwinding* combines an objective truth of events and biographical facts with a broad range of subjective expressions.

15 And along the lines of Dos Passos's biographies, Packer, to voice the experience of his subjects, depends on keenly observed detail and anecdotal knowledge— e.g., "[Walton] was so cheap that he kept the sign to as few letters as possible: the new store was called 'Wal-Mart'; "People in the projects spent half their lives sitting on plastic chairs in dirty government offices waiting for their name to be called" (U 102, 253). But Packer's biographies also have a tendency to temper and show the limitations of individual autonomy and power. For example, in "Institution Man (1): Colin Powell," Powell, the "most popular man in America," "trying to function inside institutional failure," is "defeated and isolated" by the White House and the United Nations (U 161). Similarly, in "Institution Man (2), Robert Rubin," Rubin, the financial genius for Citicorp, after disavowing responsibility for the meltdown of the financial industry, is "betrayed" by Wall Street and Washington—and "disappears" (U 225). These examples not only suggest Packer's reliance on narrative but corroborate his position on American individualism: "I...think no one can do it alone. I think it's an American illusion to think that people are self-made. There's always a larger society that either helps you or gets in your way"²⁷.

16 Foregrounding this "larger society," both writers blend the energies and impulses of mass cultural forms, the aesthetic techniques of high modernism, and a quest to contest hegemonic assumptions about American history. Packer largely does so by repurposing and re-appropriating realism to serve his accounts of America's decline and moral collapse. In this way, he joins a certain stream of Depression-era writers, who in their documentary-modernist works, deployed the formal devices of modernist innovation for political ends²⁸. As Joseph Entin argues in the context of the 1930s' "dedication to realism,"

Faced with a culture that seemed violently out of balance, many artists who aspired to offer a 'realist' accounting of the contemporary scene found themselves using exaggeration and hyperbole, the bizarre and uncanny, to convey feelings of despair, disorientation, and dislocation engendered by the crash and, more generally, by life in an increasingly mechanized, mass produced society.²⁹

17 But *The Unwinding* is not a conventional work of documentary history. It refuses the dispassionate tone of realistic objectivity and, like *U.S.A.*, it overflows with the passionate, subjective investments of its author. Even as the biographies and character narratives are (or can be) accurate documentary accounts, they are polemical, partisan, and resolutely personal. *The Unwinding* participates in the tradition of the literature of the Great Depression in its emphasis on the effects on how, in Caren Irr's words, "objective conditions alte[r] the substance and form of subjective life"³⁰. In this context, to capture the essential character of social transformation, Dos Passos and Packer wished to describe new social conditions and a new way of representing narrative subjectivities. Resorting to techniques of documentary modernism, they do so by primarily focusing on the narrator's role in balancing subjective and objective elements within and beyond the practice of realism. Consequently, these narratives ultimately work towards transforming the genre of realism.

- 18 I read Packer’s character narratives similar to the way I read his biographies—as emphasizing authorial perspective over other elements. Importantly, differing from the character narratives in *U.S.A.*, those of *The Unwinding* contain no fictional characters. Dean Price, Jeff Connaughton, Tammy Thomas, and Peter Theil are actual people subject to the social causes of their triumphs and defeats. Dos Passos’s use of modernistic and avant-garde fictional devices to create his real-life characters is paralleled by Packer’s efforts to make his real-life characters part of a literary-journalistic narrative that combines the reportorial and truth-telling covenants of traditional journalism with techniques most commonly associated with fiction, including character development, symbolism, dialogue, and figurative narrative forms. Packer thus directs his polemical attention and that of his readers to the personal histories of his characters—Dean Price, for example: “[Dean] had bought into a lie: go to college, get a good education, get a job with a Fortune 500 company, and you’d be happy. He had done all that and he was miserable” (*U* 17). Or Tammy Thomas: “Tammy was eleven when the mills started closing. She was too young to know or care about Steeltown, the historic strikes, deindustrializations, or the specter of a whole city’s ruin. She had her hands full surviving her own life” (*U* 52-53). Or Jeff Connaughton: “To Connaughton, the whole building [the White House] was sacred real estate, and the awe never really wore off. He started giving after-hour tours to everyone he knew who wanted one. By the time he left, sixteen months later, he must have given three hundred fifty” (*U* 111). As in the biographies, Packer adopts the voices, tones, and idioms of his characters. His assessments of them make no pretense of objective detachment; instead, they overflow with Packer’s sarcasm, compassion, judgement, and cultural condemnation. His character profiles, in the context of fieldwork literature, “focu[s] on singular paths, on discreet modes of existence...truly considered as such in themselves”³¹.
- 19 Like Dos Passos in *U.S.A.*, Packer establishes his politics in novelistic—rather than merely ideological—terms and turns away from narrative realism to do so. What this meant for Dos Passos, and other writers of Depression-era fiction, was that they provided a “counter [to] the notion that fiction surrounding the Great Depression was flat and uninteresting, rife with outmoded structures and formulaic ideas that were not especially well executed”³². What this signifies for Packer is that he reveals, in literary-journalistic and literary-fieldwork ways, the complex and ideologically charged issues (among them, the collapse of U.S. industry and the decimation of industrial towns; the housing boom and bust; the rise of a new elite from Wall Street and Silicon Valley; and the perils of unmitigated financial freedom) of the three decades he examines. Clearly, *The Unwinding* and *U.S.A.* are “narratives of social justice” simultaneously presenting “the self-reflexivity of ‘high art’ and [p]olitical critique” (Galligani xv) in innovative hybrid ways. Both works create a version of a documentary modernism that is experimental while illuminating a successful blend of fictional and non-fictional social commentary.

Claudia Rankine

- 20 Claudia Rankine, in her collection *Citizen* (2014), engages in a more experimental form of social and political critique than either Dos Passos or Packer. In this work, Rankine disrupts the boundaries of the lyric to question facile political frameworks promulgated

by mass media. She creates an investigative poetry that pieces together documentary, reportage, and the poet's imagination—including testimonials, cultural documents, news reports, photos, sketches, graphs, facts and statistics—and takes the form of a third-person and first-person lyrical prose. Still further, based on “subjectivity produced by the experience of identifying or being interpolated as ‘black’ in the US... in the context of a racist society”³³, the collection works by accretion and repetition, “in a flat, almost deadened style”³⁴. Much of Rankine's style can be aligned with an experimental African American poetry that includes Sonia Sanchez, Gwendolyn Brooks, Ed Roberson, and Harryette Mullen. In *Citizen*, Rankine is at once a reporter, a collector of cultural artifacts, and an assembler of the diverse materials she presents.

- 21 The open mixed-genre form of *Citizen* is particularly conducive to Rankine's investigative purposes and her relationship to the reader. As Tanya Jean Welch argues, “Rankine's poetic form requires active reading, while her subject—a first-person speaker's interaction with mass media—conveys the need to critically and actively read all forms of social media”³⁵. Between headline news and innovative experimentation, Rankine typically fragments her texts into short news stories. But as Christopher Nealon asserts, she “maintains a lyric attitude” throughout the stories—or more precisely, establishes the “lyric” as a master category meant to be powerful enough to resist the intrusions of mediated representations and the “makeshift reality”³⁶ she comments on in her prose paragraphs³⁷. Through her profiles in *Citizen*, the narrator hopes to compensate for the “non-reported” facts by providing a competing bodily (and historical, intellectual, and racial) register among the images and news stories she presents.
- 22 Through its inflections of a documentary-modernistic hybridity, *Citizen* reads both as poetry and journalism based on Rankine's intimately glossed fieldwork. The work relies on testimonies, featuring reproductions of art works and photographs, incorporating media images into a written text, and combining quotations from artists, writers, and critics in order to examine, through the speaker's personal experiences, racial injustice in the U.S. As Nick Laird notes in the *New York Review of Books*, “*Citizen* suggests that racial harmony is superficial—skin deep—and Americans revert readily and easily to their respective racial camps”³⁸. But Rankine's conversations on race depend on refashioning the lyric to lean towards the language of prose, “plain direct, conversational, though simultaneously uncanny and reverberant”³⁹. Indeed, her fieldwork is on the cusp of poetry and an innovative journalistic-like critique: she does not depend on mere presentation but instead, in the grain of Charles Reznikoff, Muriel Rukeyser, and Mark Nowak, displays an ethical-political position that is meant to serve as social evidence and fact.
- 23 Most of her anecdotes and short news stories in *Citizen* originate from the profiles of racially coded, abused, and slain African Americans. Serving as sources and explanations, these profiles—both personal to the poet herself and widely recognized cultural and news images—are essential to an understanding of the book. In her profile of Serena Williams, Rankine raises the question of who speaks for her and through her: “For years you attribute to Serena Williams a kind of resilience appropriate only for those who exist in celluloid. Neither her father nor her mother nor her sister nor Jehovah her God nor NIKE camp could shield her ultimately from people who felt her black body didn't belong on their court, in their world” (C 26). Through accretion and repetition, and use of the present tense—techniques found throughout the book—

Rankine shows Williams as someone whose self-identification and individuation has been culturally stolen: "...Serena's frustrations, her disappointments, exist within a system you understand not to try to understand in any fair-minded way because to do so is to understand the erasure of the self as systematic, as ordinary" (C 32). For Rankine, Williams in an analogue to black anger and daily experience ("American culture provokes black rage and then demonizes it when it is expressed" (Domestico, 35)) to which her addressed "you" must identify: "Every look, every comment, every bad call blossoms out of history, through her, onto you" (C 32).

- 24 Like several of Packer's biographies, Rankine's profiles in *Citizen* constantly challenge the legitimacy of media images that come to stand in for reality. As the speaker emphasizes in her assessment of Hurricane Katrina, "The fiction of the facts assumes innocence, ignorance, lack of intention, misdirection; the necessary conditions of a certain time and place" (C 83). As opposed to such images that "assum[e] randomness and indeterminacy" (C 85), Rankine wishes to individuate and personalize her subjects, and does so, for example, by memorializing their deaths. The profile of Trayvon Martin, a seventeen-year-old African American, shot by a neighborhood watch volunteer in 2012, takes the form of an emotive script in which the speaker pays tribute to Martin by emphasizing the possibility of multiple interpretations. Similarly, in her profile of James Craig Anderson, murdered in a hate crime in Jackson, Mississippi, she provides, in the form of a lyrical tribute, her interpretation of the events. For her profile of Mark Duggan, a black British man shot and killed by police in Tottenham, North London, in 2011, the speaker emphasizes the humanly tangible: "Grief comes out of relationships to subjects over time and not to any subject in theory" (C 17). "Totally immersed in the geographic or social space"⁴⁰ of the US, Rankine thus retells media narratives in her own journalistic-lyrical way, suggesting that we need to interrogate our perceptions and interpretations of a mediated world.

Conclusion

- 25 The modernist-inflected prose of Packer and the news-oriented poems of Rankine are meant to testify to the often-unheard voices of people struggling to survive in the face of unspeakable violence, displacement, poverty, economic exploitation, and racism. The assortment of journalistic and fictional material in their prose and poetry cannot be said to be wholly or exclusively discursive or polemical because this material contains within it a cohesive string of visceral, experiential, and affective language. In their narratives, these two writers make a journalistic language read like a modernist, anti-realist or quasi-realist prose or lyric, the end result of which asks some hard questions about the categorizations and conceptualization of non-realistic practices in the literary journalism/fieldwork literature canon. In other words, thinking of prose that does not encourage defaulting to the forms and reading modes of realism, and thinking of poetry as a form of journalism, can be vitally expansive because the status of both narrative genres is then located within "the generic democracy of the written—[as] a *piece of writing*"⁴¹ rather than as an elite or inaccessible document. But, to push this point further, in their works under discussion, Packer and Rankine treat all the language of their "documents" and fieldwork as expressive features; they tend to conceive of all their "non-realistic" or poetic language as factual expressions.

- 26 In the context of an American documentary-modernistic tradition,⁴² these two writers signal the necessity of reading against the grain of narrative realism. While using objectively existing reality as a formal touchstone, Packer and Rankine blend the highest values of the documentary aesthetic—"honesty, accuracy, and openness to the contingent details of the empirical world" with a modernistic interrogation of the ways in which "subjective perception and thought mediat[e] any possible apprehension of the world"⁴³. Although they were certainly not the first to do so—Rankine is working from a long poetic tradition that includes Anna Louise Strong, Langston Hughes, W.C. Williams, Melvin Tolson, Kenneth Fearing, Charles Reznikoff, Muriel Rukeyser, C.D. Wright, and Mark Nowak; Packer from a literary-journalistic tradition that includes Meridel Le Sueur, Tess Gallagher, Ernest Hemingway, James Agee, John Hersey, Michael Herr, David Foster Wallace, Joan Didion, and others—they are two crucially important 21st-century examples of writers who work historical documents, artifacts, and the news into their writing while questioning the position that realism has for contemporary narratives⁴⁴.
- 27 Understood more broadly, Packer and Rankine have developed narrative forms that create something qualitatively different from either non-fiction or poetry or what has been overtaxed (and over-simplified) as documentary/realistic prose. Their writing responds to cultural and personal stories, by beginning with a conception of the written text in relation to its social motivation. Without belaboring the point, the taxonomic distinction makes a difference: it points the way both to the past and to the future of social writing itself, to such prose forms and poetries that are willing to discard the existing audience by creating works—and imagining alternative narrative lineages (e.g., based on non-fictional and lyrical, literary-journalistic and literary-fieldwork forms)—that call into being new kinds of language re-production and combination, and, perhaps most importantly, new methods of reading.

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- ¹ See for example John Xiros Cooper, "Modernism in the Age of Mass Culture and Consumerism," *The Oxford Handbook of Modernisms*, Eds. Peter Broker, Andrzej Gasiorek et al., Sept. 2010. Web; Joseph Entin, *Sensational Modernism: Experimental Fiction and Photography in Thirties America*, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2007; and Alison Pease, *Modernism, Mass Culture, and the Aesthetics of Obscenity*, Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 2000.
- ² George Packer, *The Unwinding: An Inner History of the New America*, New York, Farrer, Strauss and Giroux, 2013, p. 3. Henceforth *U*.
- ³ Following Tyrus Miller, in what follows I argue that modernism and documentary were "not so much opposed as instead complementary moments of a broader modernist poetics." Tyrus Miller, "Convergence and Complementarity in the 1930s," *Modernism/Modernity*, Vol. 9, No. 2, 2002, p. 226. As demonstrated by Rankine and Packer, that formally innovative and experimental narrative forms and realistic explorations of cultural and social phenomenon can co-exist and inform each other has become a contemporary mainstay. It must be recalled, though, as Miller argues, "that documentary arose in close relation to the later development of modernism in the late 1920s and 1930s," p. 226. But, as I will show, the end result of this complementarity—for Rankine, Packer, and others working in this tradition—is the creation of a documentary-modernist hybrid that both uses and transcends the aesthetic practices of journalism and modernism.
- ⁴ Claudia Rankine, *Citizen: An American Lyric*, Minneapolis, Graywolf Press, 2014, p. 24. Henceforth *C*.
- ⁵ As part of the literary-journalistic equation in my argument, and conceiving of Packer and Rankine as literary journalists in their works under discussion, it is important to note that both write journalism and non-fiction as

well as fiction. They thus largely fall outside the category of fieldwork literature writers who belong to the social sciences (e.g., the ethnologist, Marc Augé, the anthropologist, Eric Chauvier). See Rankine's pieces in *The New York Times* (e.g., "The Condition of Black Life is Mourning," June 22, 2015) and Packer's voluminous work for *The New Yorker* (e.g., "A New Report Offers Insights into Tribalism in the Age of Trump," Oct. 12, 2018). Their literary fieldwork often stems, at least partially, from journalistic epistemologies and practices as well as from their literary and cultural agendas. In Rankine's case, this is a highly experimental, montaged, and poetic ("lyrical") form of journalism.

- ⁶ Dominique Viart, "Fieldwork in Contemporary French Literature," *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies*, vol. 20, nos. 4-5, 2016, p. 589.
- ⁷ Too vague and static, most baseline definitions of journalism do not adequately consider journalism's transformations and possibilities for innovations (See G. Stuart Adam, *Notes towards a Definition of Journalism: Understanding and Old Craft as an Art Form*, St. Petersburg, FL, Poynter Institute for Media Studies, 1993; and Barbie Zeliger, *What Journalism Could Be*, New York, Polity Press, 2016). As Tom van Hout and Peter Burger have noted, "the craft of journalism is no longer exclusively defined by reporting. Instead, for a large majority of journalists, making news now means navigating dense information flows" (URL: <http://www.oxfordhandbooks.com/view/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190212896.001.0001/oxfordhb-9780190212896-e-g>) In its treatment of journalism, this article centers on its possible values in relation to experimental forms. According to the American Press Institute, the value of journalism "flows from its purpose to provide people with verified information they can use to make better decisions, and its practices, the most important of which is a systematic process – a discipline of verification – that journalists use to find not just the facts, but also the "truth about the facts" ("What is the Purpose of Journalism," URL: <https://www.americanpressinstitute.org/journalism-essentials/what-is-journalism/purpose-journalism/>).
- ⁸ For a short history and terminological discussion of literary journalism, see Richard Keeble, "Literary Journalism," in *Communication, Oxford Research Encyclopedia*, July 2018, <http://communication.oxfordre.com/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228613.001.0001/acrefore-9780190228613-e-836>. Regarding the relationship between American poetry and literary journalism, see my chapter, "Metabolizing Genres: American Poetry and Literary Journalism" in *The Routledge Companion to American Literary Journalism*, London and New York, Routledge, forthcoming.
- ⁹ Viart, *op. cit.*, p. 570.
- ¹⁰ For a discussion that indirectly suggests some of differences and similarities between fieldwork literature and literary journalism, most notably the "powers" of journalism and those of the social and hard sciences in relation to the literary (and to documentary fiction), see Lionel Ruffel, "Un réalisme contemporain: les narrations documentaires," *Littérature* 2012/2, no° 166, p. 13-25.
- ¹¹ Viart, *op. cit.*, p. 573, 575.
- ¹² Claudia Rankine, "Claudia Rankine: Blackness in the White Imagination Has Nothing to Do with Black People," interview by Kate Kellaway, *The Guardian*, 27 Dec. 2015, URL : <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/dec/27/claudia-rankine-poet-citizen-american-lyric-feature>
As Pamela Ballinger has argued, "The traditional means by which anthropologists have studied 'culture,' as well as 'society,' has been through field research. For anthropologists, fieldwork often becomes synonymous with participant-observation, the method of 'being there' and gaining experiential, detailed knowledge." Pamela Ballinger, "How to detect culture and its effects," *The Oxford Handbook of Political Analyses*, Eds. Robert F. Goodin and Charles Tilly, Sept. 2009, Web. However, the "field," as in the case of *Citizen*, can refer not only to a localized place (e.g., Baltimore, New York), but to the processes of deterritorialization and displacement evoked by memories and narratives, and to sociocultural and racial contexts.
- ¹³ For a general discussion of experimental field work texts and a specific analysis of "Perecquian fieldwork," see Richard Phillips's "George Perec's experimental fieldwork; Perecquian fieldwork," *Social and Cultural Geography*, 2016, URL : <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14649365.2016.1266027>.
- ¹⁴ Both tend to produce what Roland Barthes has called an "effet du document" and an "effet de littérarité," requiring the reader of such texts to operate in and at the same time combine two distinct modes of reception. See Roland Barthes *La Chambre Claire*, in *Oeuvres complètes*, V, Paris, Le Seuil, 2002.
My examples of experimental fieldwork literature, aligned with an alternative documentary tradition, would include:
US writers: John Dos Passos, *Facing the Chair* (1927); Agnes Smedley, *Daughter or Earth* (1927); Charles Reznikoff, *Testimony* (1934); Muriel Rukeyser, *Book of the Dead* (1938); Richard Wright, *Twelve Million Black Voices* (1941); James Agee, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941); John Hersey, *Hiroshima* (1946); *The Algiers Motel Incident* (1968); James Baldwin, *Evidence of Things Unseen* (1985); David Foster Wallace, "On Shipping Out," 1996; Mark Nowak, *Shut Up, Shut Down* (2004); C.D. Wright, *One Big Self*, 2007; William Vollmann, *Poor People* (2007), *Into the Forbidden Zone* (2011); George Packer, *The Unwinding* (2013); and Claudia Rankine, *Citizen* (2014).
French writers: Blaise Cendrars, *Rhum* (1930), *Hollywood: La Mecque du Cinéma* (1936); George Perec, *Tentative d'épuisement d'un lieu parisien* (1975); Jean Hatzfeld, *Récits des marais rwandais*, 2003; Elisabeth Filhol, *La Centrale* (2011); Jean Rolin, *La Clôture*, 2004, *Terminal Frigo*, 2007; Philippe Vasset, *Un livre blanc*, 2007; Annie Ernaux, *La vie extérieure* (2000); and some of the experimental documentary work of contemporary French poets: Franck Leibovici; Liliane Giraudon; Émilie Notéris; Nathalie Quintane; Jean-Marie Gleize.

- ¹⁵ As Alison James and Christophe Reig have noted, “La question des rapports entre fait et fiction en littérature s’inscrit dans l’histoire complexe de la légitimation du roman face à l’historiographie, mais aussi face à d’autres discours sur le monde social, allant de la sociologie au journalisme.” “Avant-Propos. Non-fiction : l’esthétique documentaire et ses objets,” *Frontières de la non-fiction*, Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2014, p.13.
- ¹⁶ Julia Langbein, “Unwinding *The Unwinding*: An Interview with George Packer,” *The Airship*, June 20, 2013, <http://airshipdaily.com/blog/interview-with-george-packer-the-unwinding>. Henceforth Langbien.
- ¹⁷ Christopher P. Wilson, “The Chronicler: George Packer’s *The Unwinding*,” *Post 45*, May, 2017, <http://post45.research.yale.edu/2017/05/the-chronicler-george-packers-the-unwinding-2013/>. Henceforth Wilson.
- ¹⁸ Recent academic re-evaluations of *U.S.A.*, most of which do not follow their journalistic counterparts, are beyond the scope of this essay. For academic examples, see Donald Pizer’s *Toward a Modernist Style: John Dos Passos* (New York and London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013); John Dos Passos Coggin’s “Dos Passos, Hemingway, and France” (*International Policy Digest*, January 4, 2014); and Seth Moglen’s *Mourning Modernity: Literary Modernism and the Injuries of American Capitalism* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2007).
- ¹⁹ Ted Giola, “The Great American Novel That Wasn’t,” *Los Angeles Review of Books*, Jan. 20, 2013, URL: <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/the-great-american-novel-that-wasnt/>.
- ²⁰ David Brinkley, “A Second Act for Dos Passos and His Panorama Writings,” *The New York Times*, Aug. 30, 2003, URL: <https://www.nytimes.com/2003/08/30/books/a-second-act-for-dos-passos-and-his-panoramic-writings.html>.
- ²¹ Richard Gilman, “Dos Passos and the Many Lives of ‘U.S.A.’,” *The New York Times*, March 16, 1997, URL: <https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/97/03/16/bookend/bookend.html>.
- ²² Will Swarts, “[Q and A] PW talks with George Packer: Strange Days,” www.publishersweekly.com.
- ²³ On this subject—and as an exception to viewing *The Unwinding* primarily for its historical and political content—see Michael O’Donnell’s “The Great Unraveling” in the *Washington Monthly*, May/June 2013, vol. 45, issue 5:6, p. 56-57. O’Donnell perceptively notes, “Packer’s narrative is literary rather than prescriptive: he does not offer policy proposals or routes back to greatness. Like a great political novel, *The Unwinding* reveals a problem with unprecedented clarity but leaves readers to find a solution,” p. 57.
- ²⁴ John Dos Passos, *The 42nd Parallel*, New York, Houghton Mifflin, 1979, p. xx.
- ²⁵ Mark Schmitt, “George Packer’s *U.S.A.*,” *American Prospect*, June 11, 2013. Web. Several of the articles originally published in the *New Yorker* appear in reworked forms in the character narratives of *The Unwinding*. See for example Packer’s *New Yorker* pieces on Jeff Connaughton and Tampa, Florida: “Washington Man” (*New Yorker*, 29 October 2012, vol. 88, issue 4; and “The Ponzi State,” *New Yorker*, 9 February 2009, vol. 85, issue 1), p. 80-93.
- ²⁶ On the matter of “believ[ing] in history,” as opposed to “individual experience,” Packer contends, “For me at least, we’re living in a time when you can’t ignore giant historical forces at work. They are shaping individuals, they are shaping communities, they have risen to the surface. We can see the tectonic forces. 2008 was one of those historic transformational years. You couldn’t write that story out of just a sort of a narrow, private, solitary experience, whether as a journalist or a novelist” (Langbien).
- ²⁷ Teresa Welsh, “The New American Reality,” *U.S. News Digital Weekly*, vol. 5, issue 23, June 7, 2013. Web.
- ²⁸ See for example Jack Conroy, *The Disinherited* [1933], Columbia, MO, U. of Missouri P., 1991; Pietro Di Danato, *Christ in Concrete* [1939], New York, Penguin, 1993; Agnes Smedley, *Daughter of Earth* [1929], Old Westbury: Feminist P., 1987; John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* [1939], London, Penguin, 2002; and Tess Slesinger, *The Unpossessed* [1934], New York, New York Review Books, 2002.
- ²⁹ Joseph Entin, *Sensational Modernism: Experimental Fiction and Photography in Thirties America*, Chapel Hill, NC, University of North Carolina Press, 2007, p. 11.
- ³⁰ Caren Irr, “The Objectivity of Nature in Josephine Herbst’s *Rope of Gold*,” *The Novel and the American Left*, ed. Janet Galligani Casey, Iowa City, University of Iowa Press, 2004, p. 81.
- ³¹ Viart, *op. cit.*, p. 575.
- ³² Janet Casey Galligani, “Introduction: (Left) Contexts and Considerations,” *The Novel and the American Left: Critical Essays on Depression-Era Fiction*, ed. Janet Galligani Casey, Iowa City, University of Iowa Press, 2004, p. xvii. Henceforth Galligani.
- ³³ Eve Shockley, *Renegade Poetics: Black Aesthetics and Formal Innovation in AfricanAmerican Poetry*, Iowa City, University of Iowa Press, 2011, p. 9.
- ³⁴ Anthony Domestico, “Bookmarks,” *Commonweal*, August 14, 2015, p. 35. Henceforth Domestico. Rankine’s work, especially her long poems, counters many previous considerations of experimental poetry and poetics that limit their study to white poets, reductively assessing what an avant-garde can do or is. On this matter, see Anthony Reed’s *Freedom Time: The Poetics and Politics of Black Experimental Writing*, Baltimore MD, John Hopkins University Press, 2014.
- ³⁵ Tanya Dean Welch, “*Don’t Let Me Be Lonely*: The Trans-Corporeal Ethics of Claudia Rankine’s Investigative Poetics,” *MELUS* Vol. 40, No. 1, Spring 2015, p. 129.
- ³⁶ Christopher Nealon, *The Matter of Capital: Poetry and Crisis in the American Century*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2011, p. 152.

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- ³⁷ The essayistic-journalistic style of the book is intended to mimic the form of newspaper columns and typeface. See Claudia Rankine, interview by Leonard Lopate, WNYC Radio, 4 October 2004, URL : www.wnyc.org/shows/lopate/episodes/2004/10/04.
- ³⁸ Nick Laird, "A New Way of Writing About Race," *The New York Review of Books*, April 23, 2015.
- ³⁹ Leonard Lopate, *The Leonard Lopate Show*, WNYC Radio, Oct. 4, 2004.
- ⁴⁰ Viart, *op. cit.*, p. 575. This kind of immersion, one of the most important formal characteristics of fieldwork literature, pertains both to Rankine and Packer.
- ⁴¹ Charles Bernstein, *Attack of the Difficult Poems: Essays and Inventions*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 2011, p. 169.
- ⁴² Of course this documentary tradition is inseparable from an international documentary modernism context. For a geographical and linguistic pluralizing of modernism, see *The Oxford Handbook of Global Modernisms*, eds., Mark Wolloager and Matt Eatough, Oxford Handbooks Online, 2012.
- ⁴³ Tyrus Miller, "Convergence and Complementarity in the 1930s," *Modernism/Modernity*, vol. 9, no. 2, 2002, p. 225-226.
- ⁴⁴ To be clear, through her reliance on lyric, Rankine pulls the reader into her social world; foremost through his novelistic devices, Packer takes the reader into his world of actuality. Both writers revisit and rearticulate the cultural and political expressions of realist forms.