Master's thesis

NTNU
Norwegian University of Science and Technology
Faculty of Humanities
Department of Language and Literature

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Epistemological (Un)certainties

The Literary Journalism of William T. Vollmann and Johny Pitts as a Challenge to Objective Journalism

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Abstract

The genre of literary journalism combines literature's imaginative ways of creating narratives with journalism's focus on accurately describing reality. This twofold orientation challenges the norms of objective journalism, a genre of writing that has come under increasing critical scrutiny. By analyzing William T. Vollmann's *Riding Toward Everywhere* (2008) and Johny Pitts' *Afropean* (2019), this thesis explores a selection of the techniques literary journalists employ in practice and how they offer alternative ways of imagining reality. Both authors display an increased self-reflectivity, which allows for a more transparent construction of the world through language. Their overt involvement in the text can be seen on different levels as they use their works for autobiographical self-realization and situate their writing within a wider cultural trajectory. Similarly, both authors reflect on their immersion within the environment and point to the epistemological possibilities and limitations of their writing. Yet despite the commonalities, the two publications have a different focus: while Vollmann's work is riddled with epistemological doubts that question common-sensical understandings of both literature and journalism, Pitts has a more activist agenda and raises awareness about African European communities.

Sammendrag

Sjangeren litterær journalistikk kombinerer litteraturens oppfinnsomme måter å skape en fortelling på med journalismens fokus på å beskrive virkeligheten nøyaktig. Denne todelte orienteringen utfordrer normene for objektiv journalistikk, en sjanger som i økende grad har blitt kritisert. Gjennom analyse av William T. Vollmanns *Riding Toward Everywhere* (2008) og Johny Pitts *Afropean* (2019), utforsker denne oppgaven et utvalg av teknikker litterære journalister anvender i praksis og hvordan de tilbyr alternative måter å forestille seg virkeligheten på. Begge forfatterne viser økt selvbevissthet, noe som gir mulighet for en mer transparent oppbygging av verden gjennom språk. Deres åpenlyse engasjement i teksten kan ses på ulike nivåer, for eksempel når de bruker verkene sine til selvbiografisk selvrealisering og setter forfatterskapet sitt innenfor en bredere kulturell bane. I tillegg reflekterer begge forfatterne over deres fordypning i miljøet, og peker på de epistemologiske mulighetene og begrensningene i verkene deres. Publikasjonene har likevel, deres fellestrekk til tross, ulike fokus: der Vollmanns verk er full av epistemologisk tvil som stiller spørsmål ved vår fornuftsmessige forståelse av både litteratur og journalistikk, fremmer Pitts en mer aktivistisk agenda og øker bevisstheten om afrikansk europeiske samfunn.

Acknowledgments

I would first like to thank my supervisor Paul Goring for giving me the freedom and encouragement to explore a topic beyond traditional literary scholarship which could sustain (and sometimes overwhelm) my intellectual inquiry for over a year. I appreciate his competent advice that gave my still heavily meandering thesis a clearer direction—I recall one of my first drafts where I devoted several pages to a highly philosophical discussion of Vollmann's orange bucket. My thanks also extend to Hanna Musiol. Her classes, various informal conversations, and the chance to work for her as a teaching assistant were highly motivating and strengthened my academic self-confidence. I would also like to acknowledge the influence of Libe Garcia Zarranz, whose guest lecture introduced me to feminist standpoint theory.

I am grateful to everyone showing interest in my thesis. Explaining it to people outside academia and without using pretentious terms like "epistemology" (which incidentally made it into the title) forced me to break down my argument into its constituents and reconsider its broader relevance. It was a satisfaction when, after getting only puzzled looks the first few times I tried, friends and acquaintances who usually have little interest or sympathy for the humanities would express their excitement. For more of these moments, I launched a blog where I shared my working progress—although I abandoned the project halfway through because of time constraints.

Me living in Trondheim has left its marks on the thesis. The city oozes with a vibrant student life and offers students the chance to try out countless new activities. Being immersed in such a creative environment increased my ambitions and made me think outside the box of traditional scholarship. And more concretely, volunteering as a magazine editor strengthened my interest in different forms of journalism, which eventually nudged me in the direction of my thesis.

The support of my family during all my studies is greatly valued. While I am not sure they always understood what exactly I was working on so far away from Switzerland, their moral and intellectual support was of great help. Lastly, I would like to thank my partner Victoria, whose love and support proved an invaluable asset. Without her, various Covid-19 lockdowns would have taken a high toll on me.

He’s a walking contradiction, partly truth and partly fiction,
Taking every wrong direction on his lonely way back home.
–Kris Kristofferson, “The Pilgrim, Chapter 33”

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1 Introduction

In the wake of the US-presidential election and the Brexit referendum, the Oxford English Dictionary declared "post-truth" to be the word of the year for 2016 and thereby implicitly acknowledged the zeitgeist characterized by a declining trust in the authorities, the news industry, and the value of facts. According to the Dictionary, the term does not refer to a philosophical position that denies the existence of truth as such, but rather it describes the conditions when facts lose their influence in shaping public opinion at the cost of "appeals to emotion and personal belief." Further, post-truth is not a label political skeptics would embrace themselves, but Lee McIntyre argues that it is an "irreducibly normative" expression of concern used by those who adhere to the ideal of truth as a standard for forming judgments (6). While post-truth neither refers to an intellectual standpoint nor is it a group's self-description, its spike in usage nevertheless remains indicative of the growing skepticism towards notions like truth and the effects its absence has on society.

Especially when discussing truth as part of the democratic process, the role of the media as an independent source of information besides the authorities has been seen as paramount, resulting in characterizations of the press such as the "fourth estate" (Maras 162) or "public watchdog" (Ward 129). In political discourse and popular imagination alike, the news therefore takes on the important democratic function of helping voters form individual opinions that are not dictated by the political powers. The *Washington Post*'s adoption of the slogan "Democracy Dies in Darkness" in 2017 (Farhi) can be seen as a symbolic reconfirmation of the press' societal role against the backdrop of post-truth politics and the increasing spread of misinformation. However, alliteration alone could hardly persuade the other side of the post-truth divide, and instead politicians like the former president Donald J. Trump repeatedly criticized established news outlets as "fake news," "sick," or "the Enemy of the People" (Quealy). And on the other side of the Atlantic, mistrust in the media has also been on the rise, as for example in Germany the term "Lügenpresse" ("lying press")—widely used by the National Socialists—has experienced a revival through populist right-wing groups (Koliska and Assmann 2730). But while it seems somewhat unimaginative to deny journalistic publications their credentials simply by tweeting or chanting pejorative slurs, the very idea of post-truth finds an unlikely ally in the humanities and social sciences.

Despite the marked social and educational gap that often exists between supporters of populist politics and academics, some scholars argue for the decisive influence of postmodern thought on the idea of post-truth. Following the postmodernist movement of the 1960s,

structuralist theories that aspired to universal legitimacy were increasingly deconstructed and the existence of stable meanings questioned. In his influential work *The Postmodern Condition*, Jean-François Lyotard loosely defines postmodern as an "incredulity toward metanarratives," and instead he proposes the use of the more localized "little narrative" as an explanatory tool (xxiv, 60). But if everything only consists of narrative and is thus socially constructed, McIntyre contends that there can be "no such thing as objective truth" anymore since the very deconstruction of said narratives is influenced by the critic's background (126). And although these theories originated from often highly academic and leftist circles, he proposes that the contemporary post-truth phenomenon has in fact its roots in postmodernism. McIntyre writes: "even if right-wing politicians and other science deniers were not reading Derrida and Foucault, the germ of the idea made its way to them: science does not have a monopoly on the truth" (141). We can therefore argue that postmodern thought called into question the unassailability of truth as an unconditional absolute, and despite the lack of explicit engagement with theorists, people outside academia could tap into this general epistemological wariness and challenge the legitimacy of seemingly commonsensical ideas like facts and objectivity.

If we return to journalism, I deem it imperative to ask how it can adapt and learn from the postmodern critique. Many scientific disciplines have already incorporated a more critical attitude toward truth, and thus researchers are often more self-reflective and dwell on their involvement in the research process. By contrast, journalism has done little to address these challenges but insists on norms of objectivity that are based on a detached and seemingly invisible observer. This stubbornness has led to Carlin Romano's remark in 1986 that the "doubt about 'naïve realism' seems to have gained the upper ground in every field except American journalism" (76). Taking the insights from postmodernism seriously, we therefore need to ask whether objective journalism is indeed outdated and inept at facing the challenges posed when science deniers, populist politicians, and conspiracy theorists alike draw on postmodern thought to justify and propagate their voices (McIntyre 136–45, 148–50). One can argue that by scrutinizing objectivity instead of following the more pragmatist approach Stephen Ward suggests (261), one indirectly plays into the hands of such laissez-faire approaches to truth. Nonetheless, I am convinced that by ignoring some of the valid critiques, we deprive ourselves of a resource that can help us understand, and thus reform, how journalistic objectivity constructs a particular version of the world.

In my thesis, I will take some of the most pertinent issues that come with objective journalism as a starting point and show how the more self-reflective genre of literary journalism can offer solutions that remain inaccessible to the routine journalist. It should be clear that any

attempt to define journalistic objectivity will fall short of its extremely diverse application by different journalists in different eras and is therefore necessarily reductionistic. Further, because of my almost exclusive reliance on scholarship from the English-speaking world, my definition will lack transcultural depth. But since I am not trying conclusively to critique the notion on theoretical grounds and instead use some of the identified flaws as reference points to propose alternatives, the simplification should not cause any methodological shortcomings. Similarly, literary journalism is a vague and only loosely defined field. Although the very term implies the existence of generic boundaries that distinguish it from either literature or journalism, to Richard Keeble it "is at its core a very messy term" (871). Rather than positioning myself amidst the incessant debates that attempt to delineate the field, I therefore follow Keeble and John Tulloch's embrace of plurality, which sees literary journalism as "disputed terrain [with] various overlapping practices of writing" (3). What is important for the purposes of this thesis is the genre's focus on the factual world combined with greater representational freedoms.[1]

To illustrate and expand on the theoretical argument I am making on behalf of literary journalism, I will analyze two works that follow different strategies for representing the world yet offer enough commonalities for an analytical discussion. *Riding Toward Everywhere* (2008) is written by the American author William T. Vollmann and follows his experiences riding freight trains across the American West and delving into "hobo" culture.[2] Simultaneously, the work is a personal account where Vollmann deals with questions of identity and his disapproval of contemporary America. The second work, *Afropean: Notes from Black Europe* (2019), is written by the British author, photographer, and television presenter Johny Pitts and documents his "black working-class journey" through several European cities in search of an African European community (Pitts, *Afropean* 6).[3] But his journey is also a quest for community, as Pitts is caught between both his European and African heritage and hopes to reconcile them under the more unifying label Afropean. While Vollmann's text is quite experimental in form, *Afropean* follows a more traditional narrative arc, yet both transgress media boundaries by featuring monochrome photographs of the travels.

[1] I have chosen "literary journalism" among a variety of competing terms like "New Journalism" (Wolfe 23) or "narra-descriptive journalism" (Hartsock 3) because it has become the commonly accepted description by its still young scholarly community and one of its leading publications, the journal *Literary Journalism Studies*. Although widely used, the term "creative non-fiction" (Gerard 8) encompasses more types of writing and does therefore not define the field I am working with as accurately.

[2] I use "hobo" in like manner as Vollmann to describe the various homeless travelers he encounters on his journey.

[3] Unless indicated otherwise, all future quotations ascribed to Vollmann and Pitts refer to their works *Riding* and *Afropean*, respectively.

In terms of scholarly research, both works have hitherto attracted little attention. There exists a small but dedicated research community on William T. Vollmann, which has produced many journal articles and some book-length studies. However, apart from book reviews, there is only one chapter within a doctoral thesis by William Roberts that examines *Riding* and its journalistic implications. To discuss the work, I will therefore draw upon scholarship that does not explicitly engage with it but can shed light on some of Vollmann's recurring techniques. When it comes to Pitts, his academic impact is closer to a *tabula rasa*. Though *Afropean* has been critically-acclaimed and won the "Leipzig Book Award for European Understanding," so far there have been no academic publications on the work—book reviews aside. Thus, my analysis is the first scholarly engagement with *Afropean*, and accordingly there is hardly a conversation I can join. Nevertheless, my work should not be seen as a monologue, since I make use of a wide scholarship, touching on fields like post-colonialism and critical race theory.

I have divided the two chapters dealing with the works into five thematic issues around which the authors organize the representation of their experiences. First, a short analysis of the narrators and their function in non-fiction works is due. From early on, Vollmann exposes his strong personal and political views and is thus far from a neutral observer—on the contrary, his background can cast doubts on his reliability. Another source of instability is his multi-layered narration where different narrative voices enter the text and question any single one's final authority. As I will show, this resistance to stable meanings does not undermine the work's journalistic aspirations but can be seen as a strategy to account for a more relative understanding of truth. Also Pitts situates himself as a narrator by introducing his background and motivations, albeit in a more sober and analytic register that guides rather than unsettles readers. His epistemological stability can be explained by the book's activist agenda.

Second, I will touch on the theme of self-exploration. Vollmann realizes his search for identity through solitary retreat and contemplation. Pitts, on the other hand, is a member of the black minority in Europe and lacks affiliation with a larger social group.[4] His search therefore propels him in the opposite direction—looking for the Afropean community to which he belongs. Though this theme aligns their works with genres like autobiography, I will argue that the heightened self-reflectivity can also have journalistic merits since both authors develop a greater understanding for their personal biases and how they influence their perception. The

[4] Throughout the thesis, I adopt Pitts' use of the label "black," taking seriously his cautions that "[l]abels are invariably problematic . . . but at their best they can sing something into visibility" (1).

focus on identity can thus be seen as a driving force that motivates their journeys, but also as a journalistic resource that is not granted to an objective journalist.

The third thematic issue revolves around the authors' engagement with the broader cultural and historical trajectory in which they write, as they both draw attention to their texts as particular types of discourse that are not isolated from but influenced by earlier works. Moreover, tapping into an alternative cultural canon grants them different interpretations of their environment that counter hegemonic worldviews. In *Riding*, this move becomes clear through Vollmann's intertextual conversations with, mostly, authors of American travel literature. Not only does he reveal how he appropriates certain works or generic tropes to make sense of his own experiences, but he also falls back on this body of literature when leveling his critique at the contemporary American society. Pitts comes from a different starting position, yet a similar process is at work: because of Europe's historical amnesia, African European identities do not enter the cultural canon and thus cannot reach a wider audience. He counters this deficiency by exploring a wealth of Afropean sources that shine a new light on liminal identities, communities, and the effects of colonial exploitation. Similarly, when it comes to the form and language of *Afropean*, Pitts attributes his literary influences to other African European authors.

While both the focus on identity and the cultural framework de-emphasize first-hand knowledge, the fourth issue concentrates on the role of immersion as a journalistic method. Being himself a member of the dominant societal group, Vollmann living with the hobos can be compared to an anthropologist immersing themselves among their objects of study, and thus to a scientific method. The same approach is hardly appropriate for understanding Pitts' work as he does not pretend or temporarily immerse himself in the same world as the people he writes about, but because of their similar backgrounds, he can draw on his own minority experience to comprehend their subjectivities. At last, Pitts' bodily presence provokes otherwise invisible biases of environments since his skin tone can hit on resistance or grant him privileged access.

The fifth and final thematic aspect is connected to the authors' discussions of journalistic methods and how they translate their experiences onto the page. Whenever Vollmann interviews people, he provides ample background information about their encounters, which can help readers contextualize otherwise isolated quotations. But he also reflects on the inadequacy of language to convey his experiences accurately—something which he partially balances through his use of photographs. In a similar manner, Pitts reveals how and where he met people, which creates additional transparency for readers. Yet on a more global

level, he also draws attention to processes of mediation, and thus one can argue that his physical journey parallels the development of the concept Afropean. The analysis of the two works will show how literary journalists can disclose their research methods and the underlying epistemological foundation upon which they build their knowledge claims.

Through my discussion of Vollmann's *Riding* and Pitts' *Afropean*, I will point to some of the alternative approaches that challenge common journalistic practices. Generally, literary journalism allows authors to write more honest, transparent but also critical representations of reality. And more specifically, since the two works touch upon other themes, they highlight different issues and generate different solutions: whereas Vollmann's work stands out through its postmodern playfulness and philosophical reflections, Pitts' *Afropean* aims to educate and spark a discussion about the black communities in Europe and thus has an activist element. It is precisely because of their independence from journalistic institutions and norms that the authors can construct their sophisticated arguments. Nonetheless, I will argue that some of the identified techniques can in some form or another also be applied to more traditional types of reporting.

This thesis will engage with many of the themes and questions raised by the field of literary journalism studies. While the *International Association for Literary Journalism Studies* —the only scholarly organization in the English-speaking world with such an explicit focus— "explicitly" welcomes "a wide variety of approaches," my approach when analyzing and interpreting the texts is derived from literary criticism. Thus, as a theoretical lens, I rely heavily on the field of narratology and employ techniques like the close reading of key passages. However, since I do work with such an open genre and make claims on behalf of journalistic practices, an interdisciplinary perspective is essential. Throughout the thesis, I therefore expand my toolbox and borrow approaches from different fields, such as communication studies, feminism, anthropology, existential philosophy, critical race theory, and the study of photography. These forays into different disciplines should be seen as an opportunity, and maybe even a necessity, when dealing with texts situated at the intersection of journalism and literature. That being said, I want to highlight that despite the focus on alternative approaches to journalism and the broad corpus of research drawn upon here, the thesis is at heart a work of literary scholarship as I approach the texts with the questions, assumptions, and methodology of a literary scholar.

2 Challenges and Alternatives to Objective Journalism

To develop alternatives to objective journalism, I will first need to point out some of its most pertinent issues and examine the concept from both a theoretical and practical angle. After giving a short definition, I will draw on the large body of scholarship that critiques objective journalism both as an ideal and an institution. One of the most serious flaws is that it does not grant journalists a self-reflective stance that would allow them to explore their own biases and acknowledge their texts' status as a symbolic construction. Through feminist standpoint theory and the Marxist notion of reification, I will be able to examine both issues and suggest possible solutions. Furthermore, the Gramscian concept of cultural hegemony will help me discuss the consequences of journalism's incorporation within the larger power structures. On a textual level, objective journalism is characterized by a seemingly neutral language and standardized forms, such as the "inverted pyramid." As I will argue, this structure has the effect of de-emphasizing agency, and moreover, the reliance on facts disengages readers from public life and removes the burden of critical reception. Following my short and highly selective critique of objective journalism, I will sketch the outlines of an alternative approach that is based on the promises of literary journalism. Being largely situated outside the demands of the news industry, the genre offers greater editorial freedom, which allows journalists to disclose their role as mediators but also explore topics that are beyond the traditional interests of the news media. While the reoriented focus on individual sentiments can result in relativism, I will argue that a text's "epistemic responsibility" can instead be a suitable standard for evaluating its success. My discussion of objective- and literary journalism will then serve as a conceptual foundation for exploring the journalism in Vollmann's *Riding* and Pitts' *Afropean*.

Objective journalism is difficult to define because there never existed a single authoritative definition one can point to. Since journalistic objectivity has from the beginning been developed for the "practical purposes of the newsroom," and not within an academic context, Ward argues that it never required such an explicit description (22). We are then trying to impose a definition on a non-academic practice which has, according to Steven Maras, meant something else to different practitioners over time and is "clearly multi-faceted" (8). To account for these difficulties, Maras arrives at a broader definition that encompasses three distinct dimensions: First, he argues that journalistic objectivity is founded on a set of professional values, which include the separation of fact and fiction, an emotionally detached standpoint, and the aspiration to fairness and balance. Second, objective journalism entails a procedural component that includes, among other things, "providing contrasting . . .

viewpoints, using supporting evidence, ensuring close attribution through quoting, and finally organizing the story into a familiar news format." Lastly, Maras points out how objective journalism involves specific language strategies, as for example its unadorned language tries to persuade and create an "impression of authority" (Maras 8). We can then work with a general definition of objective journalism that involves a specific set of values, a procedural element, and a deliberate use of language.

One of the most salient and epistemologically problematic features of objective journalism is the use of a seemingly detached and thus invisible observer. Such a "view from nowhere," as Jay Rosen suggests, merely gives the impression of neutrality while the journalist's mediating role becomes obscured and biases can persist undetectably ("View"). We can turn to feminist standpoint theory to analyze the epistemological fallacy that comes from knowledge claims without an originator. Sandra Harding argues that one's social situation "enables and sets limits on what one can know," and therefore "knowledge claims are always socially situated" (443, 442). Scientific inquiry, in particular, tends to assert universal legitimacy. However, if seen from outside the scientific community and the "perspective of marginal lives," unacknowledged assumptions can be detected and thus the "dominant accounts [debunked as] less than maximally objective" (442). To counteract the dominant accounts, Harding proposes that researchers become more critical toward their own social position and make themselves part of the analysis. This lacking self-reflectivity is also at the root of journalism's issues with objectivity, and hence Meenakshi Durham suggests applying Harding's framework to news reporting as well. She argues that most stories are presented from an insider's perspective since information "is collected and interpreted by people who are inside the dominant social order about those who are either inside or outside it" (129). However, because the observer hides behind "a third-person narration, in which the narrative voice is externalised and elided from the account" (Fulton 232), the form does not allow journalists to acknowledge their social position and its implications. By reintroducing the journalist into the text, the news content would therefore no longer be "unexamined in terms of its inherent biases" (Durham 125) but become enriched by a "strong objectivity" (Harding 461) that is aware of the limitations imposed by one's standpoint.

Through a more self-reflective stance, journalists could also reflect on how their texts are not a reflection of reality but rather a construct by an author. Jack Fuller notes that the invisibility of the mediator has led to the naïve assumption that a "report was to be virtually the thing itself, unrefracted by the mind of the reporter" (14). Such thinking is in line with the idea of reification, which Georg Lukács describes as the process when objects created by

humans and their social relations are misconceived as autonomous entities and thus acquire a "phantom-objectivity" (83). If a journalistic text is treated as "the thing itself," the reporter's involvement in gathering data and combining observations into a story is obscured. Consequently, the effect of mediation is downplayed, and, according to Phyllis Frus, instead of "acknowledg[ing] the existence of competing representations" of an event, a journalistic narrative asks readers to "accept only one of many possible orientations toward the world" (110). However, reification can be counteracted by introducing a more overt and self-reflective stance that unmasks a journalist's involvement in the text. As Frus puts it, we can "reclaim our products in relation to our labor or imagination by recovering the social processes from which they rose, by reminding ourselves of them or laying them bare" (179). Thus, by inserting themselves into the story, a journalist avoids the reification of their text and becomes more transparent towards its mediated and constructed nature, which is influenced both by their social position and the creative processes that went into its writing.

An example of an unacknowledged bias is objective journalism's overemphasis on facts, which creates a reliance on some types of information and sources at the cost of others. Without a mediator, descriptions cannot be reduced to someone's perspective and must therefore aspire to a universal validity through high degrees of accuracy. Correspondingly, a journalistic text tends to be judged primarily based on the reliability of its facts (Morton, "Rereading Code" 40), whereas all that lies beyond such factual standards is reduced to second-grade knowledge. Stuart Hall and others point out that, in their insistence on accuracy, journalists show a preference for "'authoritative' statements from 'accredited' sources," such as representatives of social institutions or scientific experts, since they are supposedly more reliable. The consequences are a "systematically structured *over-accessing*" of sources provided by the elite, through which the media "tends to reproduce symbolically the existing structure of power" (58). In contrast, knowledge that cannot easily be turned into facts tends to be underrepresented. For example, to describe the "incremental and accretive" effects of climate change and global exploitation on marginalized communities, Rob Nixon coined the term "slow violence" (2). Since slow violence is not "a highly visible act that is newsworthy because it is focused around an event, bounded by time, and aimed at a specific body," it eludes the classification into an easily representable fact and thus slips through the traditional news net (3). And if, according to Todd Gitlin, journalists "tend to be pulled into the cognitive worlds of their [authoritative] sources," they become simultaneously "desensitized to the voices and life-worlds of working-class and minority people" (270, 268). Thus, we can argue that through objective journalism's reliance on facts, there emerges a deep-rooted bias towards official

sources, whereas it has a blind spot for unaccredited informants or unverifiable information. Because this bias is hardly acknowledged, it subconsciously distorts our view on the world based on a hierarchy of information that favors the stable and empirical at the cost of the ephemeral and the marginalized.

Objectivity, and in extension the emphasis on facts and official sources, is not driven by individual journalists' preferences, but it is rather the result of the larger power structures protecting the status quo. Through what the Marxist critic Antonio Gramsci describes as hegemony, the ruling class disseminates their own values in society such that they become the accepted norms and the basis for what is understood as common sense. This process allows the bourgeoisie to maintain control without having to resort to violence or economic forces (Lears 568–71). Since the news media are themselves part of the power structure, "tightly interlocked at the top levels with other powerful institutions," Stephen Reese argues that they "have an interest in preserving the larger liberal, capitalist system, by helping maintain the boundaries of acceptable political discourse" (395). Not only does the emphasis on facts make newspapers increasingly rely on official sources, but according to Hall, journalistic objectivity also "distances [the reporter] effectively from the ideological content of the material he is handling and the ideological inflexions of the codes he is employing" ("Culture" 344). In other words, because of their detached position, journalists are rendered unable to critique the material they are engaging with. And while it is a common routine to establish a balance through contrasting viewpoints, Hall and others argue that the preference given to authoritative accounts tends to make them "*primary definers* of topics" who establish the framework and vocabulary for every debate against which contrastive opinions have to insert themselves (58). Therefore, even though individual journalists can have dissenting standpoints, the very medium excludes them and instead reproduces the existing social order.

On a linguistic level, objectivity is also achieved through a use of language that implies neutrality. Helen Fulton argues that objectivity involves "a set of linguistic practices that we have learned to recognize as signifiers of factuality and impartiality" such as an absence of "adjectives, adverbs and phrases indicating evaluation or opinion," and instead it features "declarative . . . verbs indicating certainty" (232). By using a neutral language that hides signs of evaluation or involvement, a journalist reinforces a text's status as an immediate representation of reality that was not refracted through their mind. However, for a literary scholar it should hardly be surprising that language is far from a neutral tool but loaded with connotations. As Mikhail Bakhtin famously argued, language is always "populated . . . with the intentions of others" (208). In their everyday practice, journalists cannot avoid using loaded

language either. Hall and others provide a particularly trenchant example: in the American media, the term "mugging" has been used to describe a particular kind of violent robbery, yet by the 1960s the term has been in such wide circulation that it "had become a central *symbol* for the many tensions and problems besetting American social and political life." When the term was imported by British media to describe British crime, it was therefore not a neutral label but evoked associations with the societal issues from overseas. Hall and others hence argue that labels "not only place and identify . . . events; they assign events to a context. Thereafter, the use of the label is likely to mobilise *this whole referential context*, with all its associated meanings and connotations" (19). Despite journalism's attempts to use an objective language, one can thus make the case that language is never a neutral tool but always populated with intentions deriving from different referential contexts, and even if a text features no overt narrator, language itself attests to the presence of an agent orchestrating it.

In addition to the more local issues of word choice, on a broader level, a text's form influences how reality is being constructed. A commonly used news format is the "inverted pyramid," which according to Fulton provides the most important information first, followed by increasingly omissible descriptions. In practical terms, the format allows readers to capture relevant parts at a glance, and editors can more easily remove parts to fit articles on a page without destroying their structural integrity (Fulton 143). At the same time, since the chronological order of events is abandoned, actions become linked more loosely, which leads to a "minimising of causation" (240). This structure, Fulton goes on, "has the effect of decontextualizing agency" and creates the impression that "individuals live completely independently of the sociotemporality" (241). Although the effect might be less dramatic than she describes, the core of the argument remains: facts are in the foreground, but they are being decontextualized from the chain of causal events and reordered according to their assumed relevance and newsworthiness. Thus, news articles do not follow a narrative logic, which is necessarily "an account of events occurring over time" (Bruner 6), but facts are isolated and made to signify something by themselves. While providing only facts in theory allows readers to construe their own narratives, such practice presumes their expertise and willingness to engage with topics in more depth.

Critics note that objective journalism has precisely the opposite effect and instead disengages its audience, both as democratic subjects and critical readers. Maras points out that through its focus on facts and accuracy, objective journalism neglects to address the public and enter a constructive conversation with it (62). Similarly, Rosen acknowledges the importance of objective journalism to make well-informed decisions but simultaneously proposes that the

factual style proves unsuitable for "re-engaging people in public life" ("Beyond Objectivity" 53). And from a reader-centered perspective, we can further argue that the paramount role assigned to facts turns readers into more passive recipients. Karen Roggenkamp puts it as follows: "When a newspaper proclaims that it prints fact and fact alone, it removes from its audience the burden of critical perspective" (135). Although the reliance on facts makes the overt dissemination of misinformation more difficult, it also removes from readers the incentive to read critically, and thus they become more receptive to subtle manipulations and framings of events. Both in regard to its democratic function and reader reception, objective journalism can therefore be seen as a pacifying force that disengages the public.

I have addressed some of the issues that come with objective journalism, which all seem to be connected to a lack of reflectivity granted to reporters. Because of the missing mediator figure, journalistic texts are misconstrued as transparent mirrors of reality, and facts become the almost exclusive source of meaning. Guidelines pertaining to language and form further compel journalists to translate their observations into a format that lacks critical rigor and de-emphasizes causation. The result is not merely an unacknowledged distortion of events, but objective journalism also disengages the public and discourages critical reception. Some of these issues could therefore be solved by a type of journalism that facilitates greater formal flexibilities and is not as closely incorporated into the machinations of the news industry. First, this would allow for a greater presence of the journalist as an observer and meditator to counter a text's reification and reliance on facts. Second, greater editorial freedoms can encourage journalists to explore new topics and present them in a suitable form and the appropriate register.

Such a platform is offered by the genre of literary journalism. Notoriously difficult to define, literary journalism combines the focus on portraying real events with techniques commonly known from fictional works, like the "use of personal voice, narrative arc, dialogue in full, scene reconstruction and fine writing" (Morton, "Evaluating" 244). Although journalism and literature tend to be clearly separated today, they share a long, connected history that has led to numerous cross-fertilizations (Underwood 4). It is then no surprise that in the anthology *The Journalistic Imagination*, Jenny McKay identifies Daniel Defoe's work *The Storm* from 1704 as a "landmark text in the development of British journalism" (18) but simultaneously shows how it exhibits many features we associate with literary journalism today. Nonetheless, it seems that literary journalism gained prominence as a distinct genre only in the 1960s with the emergence of writers like Truman Capote, Joan Didion, Norman Mailer, and Hunter S. Thompson, who contributed to what Tom Wolfe famously described as the "New

Journalism" in his eponymous anthology. Though their journalistic works differ, they are all characterized by counter-cultural tendencies and often highly reflective and immersive styles of reporting that burst the forms and conventions of traditional news journalism.

By exploring the upsurge of literary journalism in the 1960s, we can locate some of the genre's promises, which will in turn help to posit it as a viable alternative to objective journalism. Communication scholar David L. Eason argues that a culture can be seen as "the totality of symbolic forms which a society makes available for understanding experience." Whenever we encounter the world and want to make sense of it, we need to fall back on one of the available "cultural forms" to "organize experience" and thus "'naturalize' reality" (143).[5] Among these forms are, for example, science, religion, and also journalism. But the rigid standards of objective journalism, such as the absence of an observer or the inverted pyramid structure, demand a "customary linguistic usage" and thus homogenize how reality is naturalized. Even if the portrayed events are disruptive and have the potential to challenge our assumptions, Eason argues that the familiar "form of journalism reassures readers that traditional ways of making sense still apply" (145). However, the 1960s saw societal changes take place at an "abnormally fast rate," and hence the common cultural forms became increasingly insufficient to give meaning to the novel events and movements (147). In their works, many of the "New Journalists" therefore took a more meta-critical stance that both reveals their own social position and "calls attention to [their texts] as a symbolic construction" (145). Their journalism is then no longer a reified mimesis of reality, but instead they recognize how their particular "mode of discourse which exists in relation to other modes" organizes experience and constructs reality in different ways than, for example, "the classical novel and routine journalism" (147). In other words, a literary journalist can express an awareness of how genre conventions or codes they employ have an epistemological effect on how they know reality.

Literary journalists could only write in this new cultural form by being situated outside the economic demands of the news industry. Since their texts tend to appeal to different audiences and have a relevance beyond their mere news value, they were often published in magazines or as book-length publications, which grants authors greater freedoms both in terms of form and the themes they explore. No longer bound to a genre that de-emphasizes agency,

[5] Hall introduces a similar concept which he calls "codes." For events to be made comprehensible, they need to be encoded into one of many possible codes—with the consequence that often elites decide on how the world is framed ("Culture" 344). However, since scholarship on literary journalism more often engages with Eason, I will make use of "cultural forms" instead.

writers could experiment and construct meaning not only through the mere presence of facts but by embedding them within a larger narrative. In the context of the social changes of the 1960s, Eason argues that many journalists fell back on the "traditional literary pattern of the search for identity" that depicts "journeys in which the hero, often the reporter, seeks his own identity in relation to the break up of a societal consensus" as the appropriate form to organize experience (147, 148). Whereas objective journalism can be seen as an inflexible and thus homogenizing cultural form, literary journalism provides journalists with more freedom to reflect on their own social position, offers greater flexibility in terms of form, and, at last, allows practitioners to explore topics that fall outside the concerns of traditional news publications.

The turn toward self-reflectivity can indeed lead to a "strong objectivity," as Harding calls for, but we should not ignore that many literary journalists worked with quite vague standards of accuracy. For example, the generation of the 1960s did not seem to be particularly concerned with maximizing objectivity as an ideal but rather used the reoriented focus to double down on individual versions of the truth. Take Thompson's drug-induced coverage of the Kentucky Derby, which culminates in his recognition of his mirror image as "a puffy, drink-ravaged, disease-ridden caricature" (23). Such tendencies are in line with John Hellmann's observation in 1981 that literary journalism is almost by definition a "revolt by the individual against homogenized forms of experience, against monolithic versions of truth" (8). And because of the emphasis on individual truths, James Aucoin argues that we should no longer use verifiability but "literature-based standards for judging the quality of literary journalism," such as "verisimilitude, probability, . . . and fidelity" ("Epistemic Responsibility" 5, 14). Though this conception of literary journalism can resist hegemonic constructions of reality, the focus on the individual can then simultaneously lead down the path of relativism and depart from journalistic standards, resulting, according to some, in a "nihilistic proliferation of impressionistic and propagandistic communication" (Merrill qtd. in Aucoin, "Imperative" 282).

In contrast, Lindsay Morton argues that newer generations of literary journalists from the 2000s on "aspire to the highest standards of both correspondence and coherence" ("Rereading Code" 39). Even if the very genre grants greater freedoms for poetic license, the shifted responsibility for a text's epistemic foundations—from institutional convention to the individual—does not make a text automatically more subjective. Instead, the aspect of choice granted to a journalist regarding how to approach a specific topic can be key to arriving at a possible standard for a text's epistemological success. In her attempt to rescue verifiability as

a valid criterion for literary journalism, Morton borrows the notion of "epistemic responsibility," which was first introduced by the feminist epistemologist Lorraine Code. According to Code, "there are genuine choices about how to know the world and its inhabitants, choices that become apparent only in more complex epistemic circumstances" (3). There might be little debate as to whether a cup is on the table, but when approaching complex issues like poverty, it can make a significant difference whether one relies on statistics or first-person immersive reporting. And since the literary journalist is offered such freedoms in terms of form and content, an ethical dimension enters the reporting process. Morton argues that how one knows something is not by itself "a matter of moral significance," but the "actions borne out of epistemological practices are subject to ethical judgement" ("Not My People" 775). Thus, the choice given to the literary journalist imposes on them a moral obligation to know something epistemically responsible. While the narrative into which a journalist embeds facts and observations plays a crucial role in how one knows something, it can be argued that their accuracy contributes just as much to making an account a responsible representation of the world. Moral values are certainly no absolute, but with epistemic responsibility we can move away from the more scientific ideal of objectivity and instead draw on a standard that allows for greater flexibility without surrendering standards of verifiability.

I have argued that objective journalism is in many ways a flawed cultural form to represent reality and organize experience. Although it offers benefits for conveying some types of information, at the same time it is unsuitable for questioning the status quo or reporting on issues where the journalist's social position plays a crucial role. Moreover, its incorporation within the news industry, and thus social power structures, conditions and limits the topics a journalist can write about. As an alternative, I have proposed literary journalism. Albeit a very diverse genre that unites a wealth of different practitioners, it grants journalists greater freedoms in terms of the themes they explore, the choice of cultural form, and the space to be more self-reflective. Some object that giving up the reliance on facts can lead to relativism, or even nihilism; however, I have argued for epistemic responsibility as an alternative standard against which we can measure a work's success. Such a standard that can accommodate the tension between factuality and an almost obtrusive subjectivity becomes especially valuable when working with William T. Vollmann's experimental work *Riding Toward Everywhere.*

3 William T. Vollmann's *Riding Toward Everywhere*

In *Riding Toward Everywhere*, William T. Vollmann immerses himself in American hobo culture by interacting with the people he meets on his travels, reading travelogues of other travelers, studying their inscriptions on boxcar walls, and most importantly, riding freight trains himself. Even though we can understand *Riding* as a work of journalism that describes the lives of people at the edges of society, like many of Vollmann's works it is situated on the threshold of different genres and thus evades easy classification. Next to his journalism, Vollmann uses the work to explore his identity and critique American society; according to Michael Hemmingson, his intertextual references even make "*Riding* resemble a work of quasi-literary criticism" (163). But also on a formal level, J. R. Moehringer suggests that it "bears all the watermarks of Vollmannism," which can include associative writing, extreme self-awareness, and narratological experimentations that transgress the edges of the text. Instead of describing his experiences in chronological order, Vollmann therefore jumps back and forth between several freight train journeys and intertwines personal episodes, reflections, or political polemics. At first glance, such a rambling style of writing seems to contradict journalism's focus on clarity and communicability. However, the epistemological doubts he sows throughout his narrative can have positive journalistic implications as he acknowledges his uncertainties and thus relativizes his truth claims. I will first give a short account of how Vollmann employs the narrator to achieve those objectives, followed by an analysis of the work's links to autobiography and the larger cultural canon. Finally, I will discuss immersion as a journalistic method and elaborate on Vollmann's stated epistemological foundations.

3.1 The Narrator(s) as Source of Instability

Riding does not feature an invisible narrator. On the contrary, he is highly situated, and his extreme viewpoints can make readers doubt his reliability as a mediator of information. In addition, Vollmann distinguishes between his narrating and experiencing self and admits how, at times, he fails to accurately recall his experiences. The stability of the personalized narrator is further undermined when he lets other voices intrude into his text, whether it is the seemingly real Vollmann or an external voice that subverts the boundaries between the text and the world. All these techniques contribute to mitigating his truth claims by reminding readers of his active role in constructing his version of events. Nevertheless, I will argue that this strategy can benefit his journalism because he acknowledges potential distortions arising from the writing

process and thereby gives readers the resources to incorporate them in their assessment of his work.

From the very first sentence, Vollmann points to his presence in the text. He introduces the first chapter, named "A Short Essay on Freight Trains," by writing, "I am my father's son" (1). The predication as such seems logically redundant, assuming that the latter term conditions the first, yet precisely through its redundancy it stands out and invites reflection. By explicitly situating himself in relation to his father, Vollmann draws attention to his background, and in the ensuing discussion, he further compares and contrasts his own values to those of his father and grandfather. He then combines his introspection with a general condemnation of American society, which seems to increasingly infringe on his freedoms and replaces them with rules and regulations. Hence, he states: "I gaze around this increasingly un-American America of mine, and I rage" (4). The narrator in *Riding* is therefore far from neutral, but he openly reveals his background and the problematic relationship he has with contemporary America.

These preliminary remarks on Vollmann's involvement in the text invite a discussion about the narrator's role in non-fiction texts, or more specifically literary journalism. In his seminal work *Fiction & Diction*, Gérard Genette argues that in non-fiction writing such as autobiography, the author can usually be equated with the narrator since they constitute the same person (73). There seems to be a strong case that also in *Riding* the narrator is in fact the real William T. Vollmann because they share substantial biographical information, which is revealed through countless anecdotes from his life. However, I think this model is too reductionist as it gives the author hardly any freedom to experiment and use the narrative voice in different ways. Instead, I subscribe to James Phelan, who argues that even though author and narrator are both "located in the actual world," we should separate between the two and conceptualize the narrator as a "resource that the author can use" ("Ethics" 549, 550). In another publication, Phelan further suggests that the author should be replaced by the concept of the implied author because the "historical-I of the real author remains ultimately inaccessible" and we need to work with what the text supplies ("Implied Author" 121). This distinction seems to be especially applicable to Vollmann, Daniel Lukes notes, since he constructs himself inconsistently across his works and interviews, and thus it makes sense to infer the author as implied by each text (38–44). According to Phelan, the implied author can therefore be seen as the "agent responsible for choosing which of the multiple voices of the narrating-I to employ at which points in the narration." And further, by separating the narrator from the implied author, the latter "would also be able to communicate whether the narrating-I was a reliable or unreliable spokesperson" ("Implied Author" 120). With this in mind, we can

picture the implied author as the agent that orchestrates the different voices and modalities of the "narrating-I." The advantage of the model in non-fiction is that we do not need to take a narrator at face value, but we can attribute different representational strategies to the greater design of the implied author.

One such strategy is Vollmann's use of a narrator whose point of view seems to be so far from accepted opinion that he can be questioned regarding his reliability as a mediator of information. While Vollmann's critique of American society is polarizing, it does not require a leap of imagination to make his standpoint comprehensible. However, Vollmann pushes it to the extremes and reveals more details about his life that can test readers' empathic limits. In addition to his enjoyment of semi-automatic pistols and use of prostitutes, within the first few pages Vollmann admits to having received death threats, that "they mostly kick me out" of jury duty, and that he has "been interrogated by the FBI twice" (3, 5). He introduces these fragments of information unapologetically and without supplying explanations or acknowledging their extreme nature. Consequently, Vollmann creates an almost insurmountable gap between his otherness and the reader. The "view from nowhere," as often employed in objective journalism, is replaced by a narrator whose background and ethical values are situated largely outside social norms, which can in turn make readers reluctant to accept his worldview. If we try to think of reasons why Vollmann questions his trustworthiness, we can argue that it authenticates his narrative voice. As tools to analyze the narrator's stance, the concepts of posture and ethos prove useful. Literary scholar Liesbeth Korthals Altes defines posture as "an author's mode of self-presentation and self-fashioning, which includes his or her personal way of endorsing or initiating a social role and status" (569). To each of these postures belongs a particular ethos, which can "support or discredit [an author's] trustworthiness and authority" (570). In *Riding*, Vollmann presents himself as a societal outsider who challenges established values and norms. The ethos associated with his posture is one of unconditional honesty as he does not mind revealing sensitive details or unpopular opinions.[6] Although his standpoint is remote from readers' and can cast doubts on his reliability, his ethos implies a sincerity of judgment—even if his perspective clashes with how readers would evaluate the same situations.

Because Vollmann is open about his biases, his descriptions are not presented as absolute truths but knowledge refracted through his subjective perception, which in turn strengthens the text's epistemological claims at large. Such admission of one's inability to

[6] Lukes suggests that the ideal of absolute sincerity is present throughout Vollmann's oeuvre and thus significantly contributes to his literary reputation (39).

capture the truth seems to be a common element in literary journalism, as for example Aucoin writes of the Polish literary journalist Ryszard Kapuscinski that "through his transparent constructions of reality, he embraces a stance that is self-consciously at once visionary and necessarily deficient" ("Epistemic Responsibility" 14). Just like Kapuscinski, Vollmann embraces a transparent construction of reality where his subjectivity retains a strong presence and which is thus "necessarily deficient." Simultaneously, the transparency allows readers to spot these deficiencies and relativize his claims. Therefore, readers are prompted to meet the text more critically instead of blindly buying into it—something which has, according to Roggenkamp, gone lost through objective journalism's emphasis on facts (135). In conclusion, Vollmann's polarizing yet sincere narrative voice can then give readers the resources to better understand his personal biases and reasoning.

Another narratological element that highlights Vollmann's mediating role is the temporal separation between the narrating and experiencing self. First introduced by German critic Leo Spitzer in 1922, the classification has since been adopted by many scholars when discussing homodiegetic narratives (Birke 74), and it allows to differentiate between the present self who is narrating the experiences of a past self. As the retold experiences all lie in the past, Vollmann repeatedly calls attention to the process of remembering, which is indicated through markers like "I remember" followed by a description of the remembered. Yet Vollmann shows that his memory can also fail, for example when he admits: "Somebody paid for the last round; I disremember if it was I" (61). By hinging the truth-status of his statements on his abilities to recall properly, his memory becomes a source of instability and distortion. However, Vollmann sees the temporal distance between experience and narration not only as an obstacle but also as a necessary requirement for knowledge. He puts it as follows:

> Like an earthworm I need to tunnel through my memories and anticipations of it; like Wordsworth's *spontaneous overflow of emotion recollected in tranquility*. Hence when I ride freight trains my senses open; only later in dark slowness can I try to understand what it is that I've felt. (113)

In the quotation, Vollmann writes that he is unable to deal with the immediacy of experiences from the moving freight train and therefore needs to analyze them in retrospect, in "darkness and slowness" (113) like "an earthworm." The differentiation Vollmann establishes between immediate and re-evaluated experience touch on the distinction between what Morton describes as "reproductive" and "productive imagination." Influenced by Samuel Taylor

Coleridge, she writes that the reproductive imagination simply describes recalling a previously seen impression, whereas the latter involves a productive synthesis of different observations to form new meanings. If one applies the concepts to journalism, Morton argues that objective, fact-based journalism primarily relies on the reproductive imagination, whereas literary journalism employs the productive imagination by arranging mere facts into narratives that invest them with new meanings and "push into the symbolic realm" ("Imagination" 98). And there is also a temporal dimension involved as judgments made by the reproductive imagination tend to be immediate, but the productive imagination "needs time to reflect on a range of patterns, themes, structures, symbols and figures" (99). When Vollmann stresses the temporal distance and the central role of tranquil reflection, he therefore draws upon a more productive imagination that enables him to naturalize reality in an appropriate form. His comparison with the Romantic poet emphasizes this reading since Wordsworth also thematizes the mediation of the "*spontaneous overflow of emotion recollected in tranquility*" and how observations are synthesized into a form that generates new meanings—in his case a poem. Thus, in Vollmann's journalism, we should see the temporal distance between experience and narration not simply as a source of distortion but also as a factor that allows for his observations to mature and be recombined to create new, imaginative meanings.

The relationship between narrating and experiencing self is further complicated because *Riding* does not rely on a single, cohesive narrator but opens to a multi-voiced narration. Though the book's beginning features a highly situated and thus quite stable narrator, other narrative voices that represent Vollmann intrude into the text and thereby undermine the authorial power of any single one of them. A particularly illustrative example can be found when Vollmann describes the view from the open train door but then abruptly stops to insert in parenthesis the following meta-commentary: "When I read this over, the pallidity of my descriptions appalls me, as if I had failed to make what I saw 'real' enough" (12). The quotation suggests the presence of another narrative voice which comments on the already written text by the earlier narrator. William Roberts argues that Vollmann's admission of his representational failure "undermines the reader's faith in Vollmann's narrating self and is a reminder that the narrative is as much a product of his consciousness as it is of reality" (197). Through questioning his own powers of representation, he thus disqualifies the preceding descriptions since they are an unsuccessful attempt of conveying his observations through language. While the added critique undermines the authority of the first narrator, the intrusion simultaneously reminds readers of Vollmann's mediating role, and therefore strengthens the epistemological foundations of the text as a whole. Morton's suggestion that a literary

journalist "might intentionally provide their readers with false or misleading expectations" to make a wider epistemological case ("Rereading Code" 47) can thus also be applied to Vollmann, as he first describes his deficient observations and only afterwards questions their accuracy and thereby points towards his limited capabilities to render what he saw "'real' enough."

Another way Vollmann undermines the authority of the narrator is by playing with the intrusion of the real author into his text. In a contemplative moment, he reflects on his preference for the uncomfortable conditions of freight trains but needs to admit that he forgot the reason at the time of narration and adds: "indeed, at this moment I am sitting on a bullet train between Tokyo and Shin-Osaka, rushing toward Everywhere on my laptop with a beer beside me" (65). The deictic marker "this moment" and the use of the present continuous suggest the immediacy of his descriptions, and by further situating himself in a specific place where it is conceivable that he is writing these words, it almost seems as if the real author intrudes into the text. Or as Roberts puts it, "it situates Vollmann the writer 'out there' in reality" (198). Despite the evidence, it is problematic to equate the voice with the real author as the text cannot give us access to him, and Roberts argues that we neither deal with the implied author entering the text, because if we recall Phelan, the implied author is only the entity that orchestrates the different narrative voices. Both instances of intruding narrative voices should thus be seen as "part of the narrator's discourse despite being entirely distinct from the narrator that is narrating in the main body of the text" (Roberts 202).

But even with this narratological classification, we should not ignore the effect that the illusion of the intruding author can have, as by introducing a narrative voice that is situated on a higher diegetic level, the authority of the lower narrator(s) is undermined. Since the work opens the seeming possibility of the real Vollmann commenting on the text, whenever other narrators speak, their judgments no longer bear an air of finality because the intrusion of the real hovers over their sentences like a Sword of Damocles. And because this pseudo-author only has a few single appearances, the whole text is characterized by an authorial uncertainty that foregoes definite meanings. Yet once again, I propose that this strategy is beneficial for the work's journalistic aspect: unlike an author of a fictional work, literary journalists are constrained by what Norman Sims calls the "reality boundary" (11) since they engage with subjects and events existing in the real world. Being epistemically responsible, an author would not rigidly impose their own reality on the world but allow for a certain cognitive openness. Therefore, Morton argues, a "high degree of [narrative] closure is often inconsistent with a world that is open to a range of interpretative possibilities" ("Imagination" 104). By avoiding

narrative closure and obscuring the relations of textual authority, also Vollmann accommodates a wide reach of "interpretative possibilities" and thus acknowledges the unavoidable indeterminacy of meaning present in the real world. Such openness is in stark contrast to the omniscient tone evoked by detached observers in objective journalism.

However, Vollmann's text does not only open to other instances of himself, but also an outside voice comments on it and blurs the boundaries between text and the world. Early in his work, Vollmann describes his anxiety about sleeping on a freight wagon next to stacked wooden logs, as he fears they could roll over him. In a footnote, he adds: "When Steve's [his co-traveler] secret agent in the Union Pacific, a locomotive engineer, read this chapter, he was horrified and made me promise never to ride a lumber gondola again" (8). Although the comment is mediated by the narrator and separated from the main textual body, the intrusion of the outside voice undermines the text's status as self-contained work and opens it up to external interventions; it signals that his text exists in and impacts the real world. Vollmann employs similar strategies in other works, as for example in his non-fiction piece "The White Knights," he covers a group of neo-Nazis and afterwards lets them critique his own work in the last chapter. Christopher Coffman argues that this has the effect "of resituating the whole of the text within a frame of narrative inconclusion, resisting not just narrative closure, but also the authority of the implied author" ("Sentence" 25). While the effects in *Riding* might be less dramatic, the outsider entering the text still questions the authority of the narrator as single source of meaning, and thus his work "avoid[s] the dangers of the sort of hermetic totalizations" (33). As a result, the text's openness contributes to the authorial indeterminacy that is achieved through the interference of the seemingly real author.

By exposing his situated perspective and the writing processes, Vollmann avoids the reification of his text and thereby implicitly acknowledges it as one of many possible constructions of reality. The consequences of such an "aura of artifice" (Schiff) are that Vollmann undermines the authority of the implied author and foregoes narrative closure. Instead, the text entertains a high degree of ambiguity, which corresponds to the diverse interpretations we can have of the world. This pervasive instability can therefore render his text more epistemologically responsible and does not, as we might intuitively think, weaken its journalistic integrity. Another reason Vollmann avoids making universally valid truth claims is because of the personal nature of his journey and, in extension, the personal meanings he connects with many of his observations.

3.2 The Journey to the Self as Journalistic Resource

Even if we classify *Riding* as a journalistic text, we need to acknowledge that it remains a highly personal account that incorporates many autobiographical elements. This focus is expressed through Vollmann's exploration of the relationship with his father or his reflections on the journey as a personal escape from society. Therefore, we should not think of his trip and the ensuing book as merely a journalistic assignment, but it also offers him a platform for autobiographic self-realization. Simultaneously, the focus on the self can improve journalistic standards since the heightened introspection allows Vollmann to reveal how his background influences his perception.

On the one hand, Vollmann's engagement with autobiographical themes is manifested through his repeated references to his father and grandfather. For example, he writes that his father warned him against embarking on his freight train journey, just as he warned him against traveling to the Magnetic North Pole or Afghanistan.[7] Despite the words of advice, Vollmann leaves on his trips anyway and thereby reinforces his independence. Still, their relationship is more complex, as later in the work Vollmann retells a symbolic dream where both were riding freight trains, and whereas Vollmann's shirt turned black with grime, his father's remained "nearly immaculate, because he was my father, my guide and protector who knew everything and could scarcely be touched by death" (185). Even if we do not delve into psychoanalysis, anecdotes like these illustrate the work's focus on personal themes and make the father-son relationship to a central motif. Though the work does not offer any conclusive developments on their relationship, the exploration of the topic makes *Riding* to a personal, and according to Hemmingson perhaps even his "most personal," work (164).

On the other hand, *Riding* is a personal work because Vollmann's travels are not the result of a journalistic assignment, but they enable his individual journey of self-development. This orientation is made clear in the book's opening. After his rant about the "un-American America" (4), Vollmann ends the first, more autobiographic part with the statement and ensuing open-ended question: "although I live a freer life than many people, I want to be freer still . . . What is it that I need?" (5–6). The next sub-chapter switches from his personal reflections to a narrative account where Vollmann writes about his experiences trying to board a freight train. In the opening sentence, the previous question is recapitulated, this time addressed at Vollmann by someone he encounters: "What do you need? asked the woman in the bushes," to which he answers, "to catch out" (6). Only afterwards do we learn that she had

[7] Journeys that resulted in his journalistic work *An Afghanistan Picture Show* and the historical novel *The Rifles*.

little interest in his escapist fantasies but was trying to sell him drugs. However, through the repetition of the question, the referential context in which Vollmann originally posed it is carried over into the causally disconnected part, and thus his answer "to catch out" implies that riding freight trains is his means to "be freer" and escape the society he disapproves of. Following the personal essay, this passage can therefore give us an indication that his journey is directly related to his yearning for freedom and thus makes Vollmann to an observer who is not detached but invested.

Vollmann's discussion of his father and the flight from society can be understood through the lens of his search for identity. Here it can be useful to recall Eason's observation that in the 1960s, many of the literary journalists fell back on the "traditional literary pattern of the search for identity" against the backdrop of societal changes as the appropriate form to organize their experiences (147). Because of his disagreements with the increasingly repressive society, also Vollmann deflects, and by partially immersing himself in the world of the hobos, he explores alternative and more individualistic lifestyles. This almost therapeutic quality is further illustrated when Vollmann writes: "Every time I surrender, even necessarily, to authority . . . I violate myself. Every time I break an unnecessary law . . . I regain myself" (97). As the quotation suggests, breaking an "unnecessary law"—such as climbing freight trains—offers Vollmann the opportunity for spiritual renewal. Even more profoundly, his self-exploration takes on an almost archetypal quality and can be compared to the Jungian notion of individuation. According to Carl Gustav Jung, individuation describes the process "by which individual beings are formed and differentiated . . . as being distinct from the general, collective psychology" and therefore, it "is always to some extent opposed to collective norms" (757, 761). Similarly, Vollmann realizes himself through isolation from society and finding his individual truth. For his subjective journalism, the personal journey is thus a suitable form to describe his experiences and participation in the text, whereas the same story in the form of an objective news article would obscure his profound involvement.

The engagement with autobiographical themes should not just be seen as a necessary adjustment of form without direct journalistic benefits; the focus on the self also allows Vollmann to reflect on how his background influences his perception. The following example is particularly illustrative of this strategy. When in the moving freight train, Vollmann glimpses through its open door two children who are just about to step into a pool and writes: "that boy resembled the child I had been, and although the girl did not bear much similarity to the sister I had had and lost, she was nonetheless his sister and of about his age" (85). In the boy he sees himself, and he associates the girl with the sister he lost in his childhood—even after admitting

that the observations themselves give little support for his thesis.[8] But despite the apparent discrepancies between observation and interpretation, he does not ignore his more subjective impression and thus supplies readers with both. To the initial remarks, Vollmann then adds: "I was touched by a golden pathos almost entirely purified of sadness, so that in those children I did not even consciously see myself; they took on for that instant a perfect life of happiness and coolness whose sentimental fictiveness could not undermine it" (85). The quotation shows that although the two children cause a reaction of "golden pathos," Vollmann remains aware that his impressions are, after all, only a frame he imposes and thus a fictionalization of reality. Nonetheless, he does not rationalize and thereby exclude his personal response but combines it with a critical appraisal and thus openly deconstructs his own observations.

Having shown how Vollmann integrates his subjective impressions into the text, I should address the possible objection that the use of such fictional elements within the otherwise factual report transgresses the "reality boundary" and undermines its journalistic integrity. I think this is mostly a categorical error, which does not destabilize the epistemological foundations of the work's general truth claims. Phelan argues that there exist both factual discourses, which claim to depict actual events, and fictional ones, which are founded on invention. Something can only be false or a lie when it is categorized as factual discourse but is based on invention ("Ethics" 545). Therefore, novelists are never accused of making something up, yet the same accusation has been repeatedly leveled at journalists. What is crucial, however, is that a text can be composed of both factual and fictional discourses, and in consequence even a journalistic piece that is "a global factual narrative" can feature "local fictionality" (548). We have no issues identifying Vollmann's example as an instance of fictionality because he explicitly admits it, and accordingly we should treat statements like "she was nonetheless his sister" not as lies but fiction. Furthermore, a narrator does not need to explicitly state such transitions as they can use cues that indicate the turn to a fictional discourse, which Dorrit Cohn identifies as "signposts of fictionality" (800). In Phelan's words, we can therefore conclude that such a "turn to fictionality, considered in itself, is ethically sound" ("Ethics" 548)—as long as it is clearly demarcated from the factual discourse.

Vollmann connects his observations with his family background and thereby shows that perception is not comparable to a camera lens recording raw sensual inputs, but instead his subjectivity influences what he sees in different events. The move towards autobiography can

[8] When he was a child, Vollmann's younger sister accidently drowned during his watch, which is a theme he explores throughout many of his books (Coffman, "Introduction").

therefore be seen as a resource that an objective journalist does not have at their disposal. At the same time, the very trip is to Vollmann a personal journey, which he uses for self-realization. His emphasis on personal themes is consistent with the overt presence of the narrator, whereas hiding behind the veneer of objectivity would distort his participation in the story. Yet besides contextualizing the journey regarding his personal background, Vollmann also situates his writing in relation to the American literary canon and establishes the societal retreat as one of its central tropes.

3.3 Returning to the Cultural Canon

Vollmann's text does not try to duplicate reality, but he acknowledges its status as a hybrid of different cultural forms that is influenced by other works, genres, or cultural tropes. For example, he compares *Riding* with Mark Twain's memoirs, or he discusses how genres like the picaresque correspond to and structure his own experiences. Through introducing this intertextual angle, Vollmann illustrates how his work is not conceived in isolation but is influenced by the larger culture he inhabits—a resource the objective journalist has no access to. Finally, the engagement with the American literary canon enables Vollmann to critique his contemporary society and reclaim his American roots.

Throughout *Riding*, Vollmann compares his own writing with the authors who had the greatest impact on him. These references allow him to disclose his attempts at finding a voice and form to organize his experiences. As a concrete example that proves illustrative of the strategy he pursues throughout the whole work, Vollmann introduces his second chapter with a lengthy discussion of Mark Twain's memoirs *Life on the Mississippi*:

> *The face of the water, in time, became a wonderful book*. So Twain sums up his apprenticeship, and that wonderful book is wonderfully memorialized in the first quarter of his own. . . . I would be proud if I could sincerely write: *The rails, in time, became a wonderful book*. But that book, if this one recapitulates it, is a volume of romantic solipsism; for I will never trouble to memorize the switchyards between Cheyenne and Phoenix. (53–54)

From the passage, we get a glimpse of Vollmann's ambitions to write a work of similar merit. However, he also points to their differences as he can hardly remember environmental details and thus calls his a "volume of romantic solipsism." If we again make use of Eason, the careful attempt at defining but also limiting influences can be seen as Vollmann's struggles to find the

right cultural form to naturalize reality. Thus, by evaluating the success of his own text, he points to it as a symbolic construction which exists in relation to other cultural forms and grants him particular means to organize his experiences. In an interview, Vollmann states himself that crossing the boundaries of cultural forms can have epistemological advantages, as different forms shine light on events from other angles: "every time you cross those boundaries [between journalistic and novelistic works] and let them blur a little bit, you're likely to catch something real" ("Scrupulously Avoid" 122). Because Vollmann illustrates how his work depends on different cultural forms and occasionally borrows aspects or conventions from them, he does therefore not limit himself to a single genre but incorporates various elements that help him represent different aspects of his experience.[9] These means are not available to objective journalists, who can neither point to their texts as a symbolic construction nor appropriate different forms.

Through his explicit engagement with different literary texts, Vollmann further sharpens his awareness of the tropes or genre conventions he adopts and which might otherwise exert their imaginative powers invisibly. The same practice can be found in other works by Vollmann. In his discussion of *Europe Central*, for example, Coffman argues that by repeatedly referring to texts which inspired him, Vollmann is "reminding readers that writing is indebted to prior literary works and that his writing takes shape in the context of specific predecessors" ("Sentence" 32). A similar process is at work in *Riding*: both Vollmann's understanding of the world and the book's composition are informed by earlier texts. For example, after mentioning how Jack London's and Jack Kerouac's travel writings were saturated with the presence of hobos, Vollmann contrasts their adventures to his own: "I had expected my travels to be picaresque, teeming with wise, bizarre or menacing outlaw characters. . . . In fact my various odysseys were haunted by absence, with only here and there a few lost voices" (165). Before catching out, Vollmann assumed that his travels would be just as "picaresque" as the ones of his literary models—which they were not. But despite the admission that they were "haunted by absence," when reading his work a different impression emerges, as through countless intertextual references and the repeated quotations of the "few lost voices," Vollmann enters a vivid conversation which imitates the picaresque, or at least creates a pastiche of it. Although his travels do not necessarily coincide with the trope, he nevertheless employs it as a frame to arrange his journey in a suitable way. The example thus points to Vollmann's creative role in

[9] This generic hybridity is a central aspect in many of Vollmann's historical novels as well, which he describes himself as "symbolic history" – "a work that lies in the gray zone between fiction and history" (Vollmann qtd. in Penacchio 87).

translating his experiences into a text and how his pre-existing cultural frames of reference condition this process.

Vollmann's dialogue with a particular body of texts also establishes the previously mentioned retreat from society as a cultural trope connected to the figure of the hermit. Throughout *Riding*, he frequently cites and reflects on writers like Henry David Thoreau, Twain, London, Kerouac, and Ernest Hemingway, who are all known, to varying degrees, for their non-conformist and often very individualist attitudes. Especially illustrative in this respect is Vollmann's reference to Thoreau and his withdrawal to Walden Pond, which can serve as an intellectual model for Vollmann's own spiritual retreat. Still, one of the influences Vollmann returns to most is the ninth-century Chinese poet Hanshan, or Cold Mountain. According to Vollmann, Cold Mountain was a recluse "named after the wild place he inhabited," and who found a state of comprehensive mental peace and acceptance through his solitude. Vollmann takes the hermit's mental state as an ideal and makes it to the destination of his spiritual journey—although he admits in a typically provocative manner that he can never reach it because he loves "prostitutes as much as trees" (73). Through his conversations with different authors that all exhibit some individualist traits, but especially Thoreau or Cold Mountain, Vollmann therefore contextualizes his retreat from society as a larger cultural trope that aligns him with the figure of the hermit.

Besides drawing on other works to find the appropriate form and scrutinize the tropes he is using, Vollmann also mobilizes them to reclaim his American identity. I mentioned his aversion to increasing regulations at the cost of individual freedoms. More concretely, his critique extends to the political administration under George W. Bush. Already in the book's "Temporal Disclaimer," Vollmann writes: "This book was written at a time of extreme national politics. These circumstances shaped my thoughts about riding trains in specific ways described below" (xii). Since most of his trips took place in 2005, and *Riding* was first published in 2008, we can safely create the link to the 43rd president. By characterizing the times as ones of "extreme national politics," Vollmann expresses his disagreements with the trajectory of American politics, which seemed to be centered around the "War on Terror" and both its domestic and international consequences. Even if he does not make the connection explicit, frequent hints like his references to increasingly authoritarian airport security checks or different monitoring mechanisms strengthen this reading.

By falling back on a selection of works from the American literary canon, discussing the authors' beliefs, and partially imitating their lifestyles, Vollmann reconnects with what he considers a more authentically American culture. Thanks to his abundant commentary, he

sheds light on his political philosophy. For example, he writes: "I believe in the American myth that it is both admirable and even possible to devote one's life to a private dream" (102–03). While the seemingly more authoritarian society infringes on such freedoms, by riding freight trains and thereby embarking on a similar journey as many of his literary role models, he insists on his independence. Again, the comparison to Thoreau proves productive because the author advocated for civil disobedience in the face of governmental verdicts that are personally irreconcilable. Thoreau writes: "The only obligation which I have a right to assume is to do at any time what I think right" ("Civil Disobedience" 228). In the "Legal Disclaimer" of *Riding*, Vollmann expresses his own take on Thoreau's maxim: "the activities described in this book are *criminally American*" (xii; my emphasis). Vollmann identifies the drive towards anti-authoritarianism as a deeply engrained American value, and since by riding freight trains he breaks the laws he deems unreasonable, his journey becomes "criminally American." Moreover, his treatment of Cold Mountain, the only major non-American influence, is revealing of the lengths he goes to establish the motif as American: when he first introduces him, he emphasizes that the poet has already been "Americanize[d] and even Californiaize[d]" (95) through Kerouac's references in *The Dharma Bums* and has therefore been appropriated as part of the American culture during the Beat Generation. The return to a different set of American values and ideals then allows Vollmann to reconcile with his country, which is made explicit when he gazes at the landscape through the moving freight train and reflects: "all of this was part of one country, which was *my* country; so that for a moment, in spite of the torturer President we had in those days, I gloried as I used to do in being American" (74). Through his withdrawal from society and embrace of extensive individualism, Vollmann therefore reclaims his American identity.

In *Riding*, the intertextual engagement with different works thus has a twofold use as it both allows Vollmann to scrutinize his cultural form, and it advances his quest for identity and exploration of counter-hegemonic lifestyles. Still, Vollmann does not only reflect on personal and cultural influences on his writing, but he remains a perceptive observer who avoids imposing his subjectivity on the environment. Instead, he gives interview partners the room to signify things on their own terms.

3.4 An Emic Approach to Immersive Journalism

To situate his observations, Vollmann draws on personal experiences and the broader cultural framework. Both approaches de-emphasize his involvement in the environment and instead place the emphasis on processes of mediation. He counteracts this introspectiveness by keeping

an open mind and trying to see the world from the hobos' perspective. I will describe his method by borrowing a commonly used distinction in social anthropology between the etic and the emic. First introduced by the linguist Kenneth Pike in the 1950s, etic can be understood as a "generalised classification system" a researcher applies when gathering and evaluating data, whereas with an emic approach, the researcher tries to immerse themselves and adopt their subjects' categories of meaning (Mostowlansky and Rota 3). When encountering the hobos, Vollmann partially embraces such an emic perspective by internalizing their standpoints. The result is an anti-hierarchical epistemology that does not value one type of knowledge over another but grants the marginalized the opportunity to define issues themselves. His immersion creates a new kind of situated knowledge a detached observer cannot achieve. Nevertheless, he remains skeptical of immersion as a source of knowledge, since despite his efforts, he remains an outsider and thus cannot truly participate. Lastly, Vollmann thematizes how him being a man grants him privileged access, which he contrasts with the experiences of female train riders. The comparison will allow some further remarks on feminist standpoint theory as a foundation for journalistic inquiries.

By employing the hobos' perspective as a point of departure, Vollmann counteracts his privileged position and starts seeing the world from a new angle. This process is illustrated by his specific use of the concept of the citizen. In an interview he tries to conduct with a hobo, the latter starts insulting Vollmann: "We hate you. . . . Because you're just a goddamned citizen" (33). To someone that participates in society, the term "citizen" might sound like an unconventional insult. However, since his interview partner is homeless and therefore excluded, it seems that he defines himself in contrast to the citizen. Although structural thought posits that concepts often derive their meanings through binary oppositions, and thus the citizen conceptually depends on the excluded,[10] I would argue that members of society are hardly in touch with outsiders and therefore less informed about such dynamics. Conversely, living at the margins of society leads to continuous reminders of one's exclusion, and hence the hobo has a more intuitive grasp of these underlying structures. Their different claims to knowledge correspond to the tenet of feminist standpoint theory that outsiders often have a clearer view on various social issues. Sandra Harding argues that "one's social situation enables and sets limits on what one can know," and in extension, it is often from the perspective of marginalized lives that the tacit assumptions of the dominant group can be deconstructed and their knowledge claims debunked as "less than maximally objective" (442). Taking advantage of the

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[10] For example, see the renowned work by Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked* (1964).

hobo's privileged standpoint, after their exchange Vollmann assumes his perspective himself and starts thinking in terms of citizen and non-citizen instead of imposing his own understanding of human psychology on other freight train riders. As a journalistic resource, the move towards an emic perspective therefore grants Vollmann a situated knowledge that remains inaccessible to an objective journalist relying on an epistemology derived from the hegemonic power structures.

His subsequent use of the word citizen evokes the "*referential context*" (Hall et al. 19) of the preceding interview, and thus he can employ the hobo's perspective as a flexible building block to combine with others. The reiteration of the specific word usage is further strengthened through italics, which Vollmann regularly, although not consistently, adopts when quoting someone. While Vollmann uses the term before, it is only after the interview that he renders it italicized and thus points to its status as a recontextualized element from a previous encounter. Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of heteroglossia will allow us to explore this detail in more depth. Bakhtin writes that language is "populated . . . with the intentions of others," and a speaker can only make it to "one's own" when he or she "appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention" (208). In contrast, by typographically highlighting the word citizen and thereby separating it from his own prose, Vollmann foregoes such appropriation and retains its original context and the speaker's intentions. Hence, Vollmann purposefully employs expressions that are laden with meanings that are not his own, which gives the marginalized the power to signify even beyond his authorial intentions. This approach complements the earlier discussed narrative techniques that open the text and prevent narrative closure.[11] Unlike objective journalists, who remain, according to Hall, impotent to critique the ideological content of the material they are handling ("Culture" 344), Vollmann then does the opposite, as he consciously evokes and plays with intention-laden words to construct his text.

Besides using an emic methodology as an analytic tool to understand the others, through his immersion in the environment Vollmann partially assumes their subjectivity himself. Consequently, the distinction between the observer and the observed fades, and Vollmann undergoes a transformation that challenges the detached stance of the scientist or journalist. For example, he describes how he and his co-travelers were mistreated by a waitress due to their shabby appearance and therefore concludes: "To us she became at once a *citizen*, hence our enemy" (89). The quotation shows that because of his immersion with the homeless,

[11] As with the illusion of the intruding author, the surrendering of textual authority is again a more complex process since it is arguably the author who decides to include these elements and thus "allows" such proliferation of meaning.

Vollmann suddenly faces the same discrimination, and as a result, the concept of the citizen turns into a meaningful category to make sense of his own experiences. Vollmann's seeming transformation is in line with Durham's call for a greater standpoint consciousness in journalism, as like the scientist, the journalist can benefit from "reinventing [them]selves as the Other" (Harding qtd. in Durham 132). Georg Bauer further makes the important distinction that in his journalism, Vollmann usually does not just "hang out" with the people he writes about, but he "goes a step further and participates," which can help him approach their subjectivity. Vollmann's own views on immersive research corroborate Bauer's argument, as in an interview he admits having smoked crack: "you want to write about somebody who's a crackhead, you better understand firsthand the effect that crack has. . . . Why not just stick with what's already there for you, instead of having to talk to a hundred people about how crack feels?" ("'I'm Not Doing It'"). Through his immersion, Vollmann thus produces a more situated knowledge that aligns his own perspective with the people he portrays instead of merely approaching them through observation or conducting interviews.

If we try to further theorize the implications of Vollmann's immersion, we can argue that his participative mode of reporting has profound effects on how he encounters the world. The existential philosophy of Martin Heidegger will provide a suitable lens for analysis. Heidegger identifies the crucial flaw that most metaphysical theories throughout Western philosophy were based on rational and detached contemplation, which does not reflect our everyday modes of being. For example, David Hume derived his theory of causation by observing the movement of billiard balls, yet it would be a more likely scenario that someone is an active participant in the game instead of a detached observer (Mulhall 39). Our environment can therefore not be reduced to objects of theoretical contemplation, but the things we encounter are implicated in practical tasks. Heidegger calls this intuitive, pre-rational relationship towards objects "ready-to-hand."[12] Further, our involvement in the world changes the perception of the self, as Michael Wheeler argues that someone engaged in a practical activity involving ready-to-hand tools becomes "absorbed in his activity in such a way that he has no awareness of himself as a subject over and against a world of objects." Since we usually encounter the world while we are involved in some type of activity, it follows that Heidegger "denies that the categories of subject and object characterize our most basic way of encountering entities" (Wheeler). In objective journalism, a reporter's seemingly detached gaze

[12] In the German original, Heidegger coins the neologism *Zuhandensein* (81), which both Wheeler and Mulhall translate as "ready-to-hand." Somewhat more straightforward but elusively commonsensical, Joan Stambaugh translates the term as "being handy" (80).

relies on this subject-object divide and does not appreciate subjectivity in its implicated form. While such an analytical mode has its uses, one should ask whether it in fact mirrors a journalist's involvement in a story, or if there exists, as Morton puts it, a "discrepancy between epistemic location and representation" ("Evaluating" 250).

Through his reflective and somewhat self-centered reporting, Vollmann accounts for his epistemic location when he participates in the hobos' world. And since the challenges of the environment fundamentally differ from those of the modern city dweller, his immersion reveals new ready-to-hand uses of various objects and thus illuminates different meaning potentials that are conditioned by his change of perspective. A concrete example that illustrates this contextual shift is Vollmann's recurring discussion of his orange bucket. Vollmann describes how he and his two friends were waiting for a freight train to arrive, and as the latter dared to climb over a fence, he writes: "I stayed there with my ridiculous orange bucket" (6). Introduced as "ridiculous" and without any further explanation, the bucket seems conspicuously out of place. However, just a few sentences later, Vollmann resolves the suspense and elucidates its function:

> I employed my risible orange bucket, which I upended, stood on, and then after stepping easily up from onto the train pulled it after me by means of a string attached to the handle. . . . An orange bucket was not such a bad thing, aside from the fact that it was orange. One could sit on it, carry things in it and piss into it. (7)

The quotation makes us understand the usefulness of Vollmann's bucket in the given situation as freight trains are neither designed for people to board them nor are there specific tools to do so. Therefore, he must improvise. Vollmann takes an object like the bucket out of its usual context, modifies it according to his needs, and thereby gives it a new ready-to-hand use. Further, the bucket should not be seen as an isolated entity, but it is situated in an interconnected network of ready-to-hand objects. By mentioning several of its new uses, like to "sit on" or "piss into," Vollmann implicitly points to the lack of basic infrastructure in the portrayed environment. The bucket can therefore serve as a focal point through which he conveys his situated, practical knowledge about the environment and riding freight trains. In contrast to the detached observer, his immersion enables Vollmann to look beyond the mere appearance of objects or events and illustrate their purposes within a larger system that remains hidden to outside observers.

Although the bucket is illustrative, other examples might be more relevant within his journalism, such as the constant attempts at evasion from security guards, the resentment he receives from "citizens," or the dangers involved when boarding and jumping off moving trains. Vollmann admits his inability to understand the people he meets in their otherness; however, his immersion nevertheless seems to be his strongest claim for approaching their subjectivity. He writes: "I don't know them and they don't know me; to them I'm nothing but a *citizen*. But I've sat in sight of them on my own private patch of double track on a rainy afternoon, and we are all listening like predators to distant engine sounds" (36). In the quotation, Vollmann recognizes that he does not know them, and that they probably have little sympathy for him. This antagonism is emphasized by the juxtaposition of the pronouns "I" and "they." But following his denial, Vollmann switches to the more unifying "we," which is conditioned by their immersion in the same environment. Further, by comparing themselves to "predators" listening to "distant engine sounds," Vollmann locates their commonalities in a more instinctual register that precedes rational thought and should instead be seen in the domains of the ready-to-hand. It is then through his immersion in the others' world that Vollmann aims to gain a first-hand knowledge about their subjectivity and thereby make valid knowledge claims from his new, situated perspective.

Yet, as the above example from *Riding* suggests, Vollmann does not pretend that he can comprehend them, and thus he remains aware of his status as an outsider entering their world. His privilege is already thematized in the book's epigraph, when he writes that he and his friend Steve "*never pretended / that he or I were hobos / and therefore coined the word* feauxbeaux" (Vollmann viii). The term "feauxbeaux" implies their privileged status as beaus among the marginalized, and thus they cannot truly blend in. This privilege manifests itself, for example, in their ability to easily cross the boundaries of the hobo lifestyle and their sedentary existence. Vollmann writes, after deboarding a freight train: "we began to walk away from that life. . . . Steve's wife and daughter came to get us, and we all went out for breakfast, we three men eating hugely" (12). The ease with which they "walk away from that life" and have someone pick them up emphasizes the contrast that exists between them and the people who do not enjoy the same luxuries. Further, the voluntary nature of their travels also problematizes the idea of immersion, as Bauer asks whether one can be "truly participating" if they know they can return to their "primary world in a few days or weeks." Thus, despite acknowledging it, Vollmann's position as an outsider simultaneously casts some doubts on the accuracy of immersion as a journalistic technique.

Vollmann thematizes the consequences of privilege on his epistemological foundations when he compares his work to Thoreau's *Walden*. According to Vollmann, Thoreau was during his retreat to Walden Pond not as self-sufficient as he claims; however, he ponders whether his lack of credibility should make any difference, because when words are written "down [they] may or may not dwell with their maker in a relationship of 'sincerity,'" and afterwards they "live to the extent that they inspire *us*" (23, 24). While *Walden* empowered him, Vollmann hopes to achieve the same with his own work: "If this essay can do the same for you, then my material comforts, even if in your eyes they render me a dilettante or a hypocrite, have been useful means to that end" (24). By shifting the attention from the epistemological validity of immersion to his text's impact on readers, Vollmann partially addresses his own inadequacies but insists that they do not render the text invalid since it can still be a source of empowerment. He then concludes by writing, "If this essay fails, the fault must be in it, in you, me, the orange bucket or some combination of the above; all the same it was still written 'sincerely'" (24). Though playing with the possibility of the text's failure, Vollmann thus appeals to his own sincerity and argues that, despite its shortcomings, it was still his best and most genuine attempt. The admission of epistemological uncertainty once again tones down his truth claims and thereby makes his texts more epistemologically responsible. Nonetheless, Vollmann leaves final judgment of its success, both in terms of its journalistic merits and capacities to empower, to the reader.

Besides investigating how privilege can distort his own immersion, Vollmann more generally touches upon his privileged access to the environment itself. The importance of this factor becomes especially clear when he examines the conditions for female hobos in the chapter "Diesel Venus." Vollmann argues that on his travels he mostly meets men, and many of them are looking for female company. In support of his claim, he quotes several of his encounters or cites passages from books and travelogues and thereby creates the impression of a male dominated and highly misogynic environment. For example, the hobo "Pittsburgh Ed" suggests that most men on the rails are "pussy-hungry," but to him women are only "great for a bedwarmer and a cook and sex and hustling" (Vollmann 135). Vollmann does not hide behind the guise of a detached observer either but shares the desire for female company. On the one hand, this is manifested through his reminiscences of an ex-girlfriend with whom he rode freight trains. On the other hand, and this can be ethically challenging, one can argue that Vollmann somewhat shares Pittsburgh Ed's wantonness. His desire can be implied from incidental and often sexist comments. For example, when being served by a waitress, Vollmann writes: "Only Steve's son was young enough to have a shot at sleeping with her" (66). While

one can attempt to relativize such statements in view of Vollmann's engagement with the sex-saturated Beat literature, his unapologetic expression of lust simultaneously makes him transgress the role of the immersive scientist and turns him into a participant reproducing the misogynic environment. Such moments of intemperance can bring him into disrepute with many readers and challenge the acceptability of his worldview. However, apart from rendering him unpopular, one can argue that his obvious disregard for how people judge him once again strengthens his ethos of sincerity and thus authenticate his persona.

Vollmann does luckily not conclude by describing the masculine environment from a male perspective, but he challenges the standpoint and asks how "the tale [might] have been told from Venus's point of view?" (131). Ensuing, he describes his interview with Dolores, a woman who used to ride freight trains herself and now reveals her experiences with sexual abuse while on the rails: "I was so scared and tried to look like a boy—here Dolores made a gesture as if to press her breasts apart and into concealing flatness" (132). The quotation shows that, afraid of being identified as a woman, Dolores tried to hide her identity and disguise herself as a man. And while describing a unique situation, her experiences can be seen as exemplary of the threats more female hobos face. We can again fall back on feminist standpoint theory to examine the advantages of the expanded perspective. Harding argues that "some social situations are scientifically better than others as places from which to start knowledge projects" (450). By interviewing Dolores, Vollmann brings in an intersectionally marginalized standpoint as she is both excluded from society and a minority within the hobo community. Although the standpoint of the male hobo offered Vollmann a new understanding of his own society, this perspective remained itself "critically unexamined" (Harding 443) towards its own misogynic attitudes. Thus, by invoking Dolores' intersectional perspective, Vollmann employs a social situation that is better suited to scrutinize the biases of the marginalized environment. This illustrates that there are no standpoints that are inherently superior for all types of inquiries, but instead their suitability depends on their relative context. Through invoking the female point of view, Vollmann therefore shows that as a journalistic resource, it can be sensible to invoke different marginalized standpoints to examine hidden assumptions both of the dominant but also other marginal social situations.

Through immersion and participation in the environment, Vollmann gains a closer access to the perspectives of the marginalized and thereby counterbalances his privilege as a "citizen." From the new epistemic location, he is offered a more intuitive understanding of the people he writes about, which would be denied to an external observer. His contemplation of the orange bucket illustrates the shift in perspective that affords him a new, ready-to-hand

understanding of objects and their environment. Even though I used the term emic as a conceptual foundation for his immersive research, my examples showed that he can hardly be confined to the role of a scientist as, corresponding to the personal nature of his journey, his own interests and desires shine through. While emic is only an approximation, Vollmann's journalistic methods are also unconventional and something he openly thematizes in his work.

3.5 Tensions between Fact and Fiction

Because Vollmann is reporting from an environment where inequalities between journalists and their subjects abound, differences in social status lead to friction and misunderstandings. He counterbalances this source of distortion by providing additional details on interview situations and thus grants readers the means to assess the exchanges. Similarly, Vollmann evaluates the quality of information himself and occasionally hedges dubious statements with verbal cues that signal ambiguity. Moreover, such introspection is not limited to journalistic methods as Vollmann also scrutinizes the philosophical foundations upon which he builds his knowledge. And although he insists on an individualist epistemology, there exists a tension to his reliance on verifiable facts and photographs. I hope to resolve this tension by pointing to the qualitatively different types of knowledge claims literary journalism can achieve.

Vollmann describes many interactions in detail instead of presenting statements as isolated quotations. This attention to context is especially important for the subject matter of his work since the large social gap between reporter and subject often prevents smooth and successful communication. For example, in an interview his interlocutors grow increasingly suspicious of his motives after he reveals being a journalist. He describes approaching an "alley tramp" who looked less "busy and unfriendly" (31). Interested in knowing more about the FTRA, a freight rider clique, the man dismissively describes them as "a bunch of motherfuckers." But as soon as the hobo's girlfriend joins them, they want to learn his intentions, to which Vollmann replies: "I'm a reporter." The revelation undermines his trust immediately, as the "two of them recoiled and the man said: I swear I didn't tell him nothin'" (32). In the remaining interview, Vollmann is met with suspicion and disdain, and whereas the man initially insulted the FTRA, they start defending them and instead verbally abuse Vollmann. By drawing attention to the interaction, Vollmann then foregrounds the very act of reporting and contextualizes their statements. Objective journalism depends on an invisible observer and can therefore not make use of such a resource.

The example suggests that, in the given environment, social inequalities between the journalist and the interviewee can be a cause of friction. One strategy Vollmann uses to partially

bridge this gap is to pay his sources and thereby stage the illusion of being equal partners in a monetary transaction. In his comparative analysis of James Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* and Vollmann's *Poor People*—both works that depict desolate poverty—Aaron Chandler argues that Agee's pity for his subjects "overtakes his respect for them," which results in a "voyeuristic invasiveness." Vollmann, on the other hand, pays them for their time. Because they are involved in a financial exchange, their interaction is no longer based on Vollmann's inquisitiveness into their extraordinary lives, but they are temporarily bound by the rules of the exchange. Thus, Chandler suggests that, given "the realities of startling economic inequity, moral equality might be staged." Though Vollmann does not feature a discussion of his journalistic methods like he does in *Poor People* (xi-xv), also in *Riding* he frequently pays his sources for interviews. For example, Vollmann describes his encounter with yet another hobo couple: "I asked if either had caught out and the man shook his head with the least possible amount of effort, while the woman said: I have. What about it? I offered her five dollars for a story." However, as Vollmann continues, the woman declined, whereas suddenly "the man, deciding that he must have caught out after all, weakly offered to tell me a story about crossing the desert on a freight train" (89). While the woman's skepticism has not ceased, the monetary incentive got the man talking. At the same time, his sudden change of mind casts some doubts on the veracity of his accounts, as it is unclear whether he makes up a story to get five dollars, or whether it merely made him more willing to share it.[13] But since Vollmann is describing the reporting process, readers are given the means to assess the quality of the given information themselves.

Also when it comes to Vollmann's photography, an aspect I have hitherto devoted no attention to, he tries to stage the encounters with his subjects at eye level and allow them some influence over their self-representation. *Riding* features 65 monochrome photographs in its appendix, which Vollmann took during his trips, and they depict, among other things, vistas from moving boxcars, various graffiti or scribbles, and portraits of hobos. What stands out is that all the images depicting people have been staged, as they look at the camera and react to the photographer. Their staged nature has profound implications for the work's truth claims because it opens the photographs to the subjects' participation. In his influential study *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes describes that as soon as he feels "observed by the lens, everything

[13] In an interview, Vollmann defends paying his sources, saying: "as long as the person had no particular expectation of seeing me again and no sense that I particularly disapproved or wanted the story to go in any particular way, then there was no incentive to cast the story differently," although he admits that "if the person could get me to come back and give more money, then I might run into some poor Scheherazade" (Vollmann qtd. in Bauer).

changes" since he intuitively starts "posing" (10) so the photograph will "coincide with my (profound) 'self'" (12). Similarly, because Vollmann asks people to have their photographs taken instead of doing so secretly, he gives them a greater agency over their self-presentation.

Furthermore, as with his interviews, Vollmann does not present his photographs in isolation but often provides the appropriate context as well. On the one hand, this happens through his bibliographical index, which indicates the place and date the photos were shot. On the other hand, he frequently describes in his prose when he takes a picture, which then allows readers to connect photographs to specific text passages. Although the links are not made explicit, as in *Poor People,* which includes an extensive footnote system, the connections between text and photograph often leave little doubt. By supplying their context, Vollmann therefore presents his photographs not as an unmediated depiction of reality. As an example, he describes having paid a hobo for a photo, which he then features in the book's appendix: "I still remember the lordly contempt of the hobo in Missoula who for five dollars pulled his hat down over his eyes, crossed his legs and gazed into my camera lens, sitting in the grass beside the freeway" (98). The quotation suggests that the photograph is staged, and that the hobo posed for him. While it does not become unmistakably clear whether Vollmann asked him to pose in this way, or if the pose is his reaction to the request, Vollmann calls attention to his "lordly contempt." The hobo is therefore granted the opportunity to express his dissatisfaction and react to Vollmann, whereas the reader can through the additional context better understand the photograph not as a mirror of reality but as a result of Vollmann's involvement in the world. By making his subjects participate, Vollmann once again questions his final authority over the work and, in a democratic gesture, shares it with the people whose photographs he features.

Next to providing readers with the context to assess facts or statements, Vollmann uses different verbal hedges to signal ambiguity when integrating questionable information without undermining his own credibility. He does so by borrowing expressions or motifs from different cultural forms and in that way mobilizes their referential contexts. For example, Vollmann retells an unlikely anecdote that happened to a "friend of a friend" (100) and thereby mirrors a common motif from urban myths, which is supposed to authenticate a story. However, as Françoise Lavocat argues, while such "signposts of factuality" ought to signal a story's factual nature, "their reiterated use over time deprives them of their effectiveness;" they turn into clichés and become signposts of fictionality instead (585). Through the hedge "friend of a friend," Vollmann therefore points to the ambiguous status of the retold story and avoids threatening the globally factual narrative. An even more explicit use of such a hedge is his frequent adoption of the fairy tale motif "once upon a time," which is an obscure time reference

and seems conspicuously out of place in a journalistic text that values accuracy. Further, because "once upon a time" is associated with fairy tales, it imports their referential context and hints at the intrusion of the fictional. But Roberts argues that within Vollmann's work it has a journalistic function, as he only makes use of it when retelling others' stories or relating to long past experiences and "thereby obscuring the actual time frame and undermining the reader's faith in the veracity of his accounts" (190). Since the retold events are of such an unreliable nature, the obscured time frame and his epistemological doubts therefore relativize his truth claims and make his text more epistemologically responsible. Vollmann's hedges can help distinguish between qualitatively different types of information and thereby allow him to incorporate questionable data which a strictly fact-based journalism should handle more carefully.

The attention Vollmann devotes to processes of mediation invites a general discussion of the epistemological foundations upon which he builds his knowledge claims. There are many allusions to his individualist philosophy throughout the work, but he states his position most unambiguously when reflecting on his observations in the prairies of Wyoming:

> Since I am the first observer ever to have travelled in this unknown territory called Wyoming, I ought to descibe [sic] the prairie's greennesses, undulations, wildcat oil wells, fences, hawks and antelopes, some of which are black and white. . . . How can I say what I saw, heard, smelled, tasted and felt in Terra Incognita? You may have visited Wyoming; you have probably seen grass; very likely you've followed a fence; you could be familiar with the outlines of antelopes. But have you seen what I've seen? Did I see what Steve saw? (72)

Though Vollmann describes himself as "the first observer" of "this unknown territory," he clarifies the figurative nature of his statement by acknowledging that readers might also have visited Wyoming. Instead, he insists that his perception of the state differs from readers' or Steve's—despite similar sensory inputs. Moreover, Vollmann writes that he "ought to" describe what he saw yet follows with a rhetorical question that implies his inability to convey his observations through language.

To unwrap the quandary, we must draw attention to how seeing and describing one's impressions is far from straightforward but a very individualistic process. In his influential study of literary journalism, John C. Hartsock argues that every description of the physical world necessarily "results in incompleteness" since things have to be excluded "either

intentionally as part of the selection process, or because [they are] unobserved" (45). And since the observation and its subsequent retelling can never be complete, every observer will have different aspects and details they notice and will hence arrive at a different aesthetic experience. Hartsock provides the example of Samuel Johnson and James Boswell's joint walking tour in 1773 through Scotland and the Hebrides, where "they discovered . . . that they reported differently on the same observations" (47). However, Hartsock argues that the "fundamental instability of observation" (48) is not something we tend to readily accept as especially for genres like objective journalism that are "making a referential claim to the seeming solidity of the phenomenal," it is "epistemologically unsettling" (47). By commenting on the individualistic nature of his experiences, Vollmann thus acknowledges the instability of observations and their dependence on his standpoint.

Further, Vollmann's inability to describe his sensual impressions is not only due to necessary "cognitive reductionism" (Hartsock 46) but can also be caused by the very inadequacy of language to reliably describe the personal meanings he associates with signifiers like "fences, hawks and antelopes." One can agree on a definition of an antelope, but our mental representations of it can still differ considerably, and thus the signifier remains an inaccurate description of what Vollmann is in fact seeing. And even if he took the pains to meticulously describe the appearance of said antelope, he would once again need to make use of more signifiers, whose meanings are once again defined by other signifiers. As a result of this endless process of signification, which Jacques Derrida describes as "differance" (140), meaning is perpetually deferred onto more language but never reaches a final signified. While ever more detailed descriptions can help us get closer to Vollmann's vision, we can never access it. In conclusion, we can say that Vollmann works with an individualist epistemology according to which our individual backgrounds make us see the world in different terms, and while we can try to approximate each other's subjectivities, at last, we remain unable to share them through language.

Nonetheless, I do not think that Vollmann's text can be reduced to a "volume of romantic solipsism" (Vollmann 54) as there exists a playful tension between his individualist musings and a meticulous reliance on empirical evidence and facts. I mentioned how Vollmann hedges ambiguous statements, or how he indicates highly personal observations through various signposts of fictionality. Paratextual elements also contribute to the authentication of

Vollmann's claims.[14] In the section titled "Sources," for example, Vollmann lists in a scholarly fashion the works he has cited and reveals additional information about his interviews. The entry referencing the encounter with Dolores thus states: "Dolores—Interviewed at the Cafe Espresso Metro coffee shop in Sacramento, November 2006. She was introduced to me by her friend who worked at a nearby grocery store. The friend was also present" (196). By locating the interview in space and time, Vollmann attempts to authenticate it, and through revealing her friend's presence, readers receive more background information that could have influenced the interaction. Even more revealingly, when he first introduces Dolores, he adds in a footnote: "She chose her alias, which is required by an outstanding warrant" (132). Because Vollmann discloses the necessity to have her name changed, he points to the legal consequences his publication could have and hence insists on her being a real person. Similarly, he safeguards himself when he writes in the "Legal Disclaimer" that the "stories in this book are all hearsay, and the photographs are really drawings done in steel-grey crayon" (xii). Taken at face value, the statement undermines his truth claims. But simultaneously, it can act as a signpost of factuality since by masking his work as fiction he protects himself, or his publisher, against legal repercussions for the crimes he describes. Yet the very need to protect himself implies, in turn, that the stories and photographs must be real after all. And finally, in the book's "Acknowledgements," Vollmann thanks his fact checker for spotting some "embarrassing errors (for instance, the Roseville yard is not the longest in the West, and it is six miles long, not seven)" (200). Since the example demonstrates such diligence with seemingly irrelevant details, even if it should be with a hint of irony, it is suggested that the rest of his work can be upheld to similar standards of accuracy, which are confirmed by a fact checker.[15] While the described elements do not per se document his travels, they have a strong authentication function and signal to readers that his text is free of factual flaws and situated "out there" in reality.

What can have a documentary function is Vollmann's photography. Although he admits that his photographs are often staged, the very medium allows for more immediate and direct representations of reality. It is again Barthes who formulates this aspect of photography most poignantly. As he puts it:

[14] According to Genette, paratexts are the textual elements that "surround" a work "in order to *present* it" (*Paratexts* 1).

[15] On the other hand, scattered spelling errors point to a less rigorous editorial process the book went through.

> language is, by nature, fictional; the attempt to render language unfictional requires an enormous apparatus of measurements: we convoke logic, or, lacking that, sworn oath; but the Photograph is indifferent to all intermediaries: it does not invent; it is authentication itself. (87)

According to Barthes, language has no intrinsic quality that makes it truthful as statements can be erroneous or outright lies. Thus, for it to be rendered "unfictional," one requires external verification such as appeals to logic and sincerity, or in Vollmann's case, invoking a legal framework or a fact checker. Photography, on the other hand, is a medium that authenticates itself since every photo is inextricably tied to a real event. And even if photographs are staged and therefore show a manipulated reality, Barthes argues that they are still "a certificate of presence" (87)—something which language cannot offer. By attaching photographs to his text, Vollmann then not only authenticates but also documents his journey. Admittedly, some photographs have a more illustrative function, insofar as they do not depict a specific encounter or object that Vollmann describes in the text, but others can with certainty be connected to his descriptions. And although his use of photography remains open to distortion, it nevertheless allows him to make undeniable truth claims that go beyond language's fictiveness and break free of the infinitely deferred signification of differance.

Having argued for the tension between Vollmann's inward and outward orientation regarding truth, I want to resolve this issue by once again drawing on literary journalism's threshold location between cultural forms and thus ways of naturalizing reality. Aucoin argued that literary journalism should be judged according to literary standards such as narrative plausibility but not necessarily factual accuracy. In contrast, Morton has proposed that there is no reason why the genre should not be upheld to more narrow journalistic standards as well, since in the incentive to report responsibly, factual accuracy can be an important factor. Vollmann's focus on his own mediating role does therefore not deny the facticity of his accounts, but instead readers are offered two different conceptions of truth: On the one hand, through reflecting on and combining his impressions, he creates new types of insights that have no claim to universal validity but rather reflect his individualist epistemology. On the other hand, we can argue that the isolated building blocks Vollmann employs to build such a narrative, such as his observations, factual descriptions, quotations, and also photographs, are still grounded in empirical reality. If we again invoke the distinction between reproductive and productive imagination, we can argue that the former is based on an adherence to facts, whereas in the latter, Vollmann takes the freedom to recombine and create new, fictionalized meanings.

By making the mediation of his reproductive imagination to a conscious and open process, readers are given the tools to distinguish between them and read the text both as a journalistic and a literary work that adhere to different standards and truth claims.

In this chapter on Vollmann's *Riding*, I have discussed several aspects that characterize his journalism. Among them are the situated yet unstable narrator, his focus on autobiography, the engagement with other cultural forms, his immersive way of reporting, and the open discussion of journalistic methods and epistemologies. They all expose Vollmann's deliberate construction of reality, and moreover, they open the text to outside voices that seem to elude his authorial control, whether it is through destabilizing the narrator, acknowledging the influence of cultural tropes, but also through Vollmann's adoption of the hobos' frame of reference or requests to pose for his photos. Through employing a highly situated narrator but simultaneously obscuring textual authority, Vollmann pushes the boundaries of journalistic, and possibly even literary journalistic, practices to their limits. It is then no surprise that Roberts describes Vollmann's work as the "most overtly postmodern" in his analysis of six literary journalistic works (189). While documenting his personal journey, Vollmann's account also constitutes a highly critical and somewhat playful exploration of epistemological issues—one which runs the risk of disorienting readers through what is arguably an indulgence in postmodern *jouissance*. Johny Pitts, on the other hand, might have completed a similar personal journey. However, his focus seems to be more practical than philosophical, as he educates a larger audience about the unseen African presence in Europe and must therefore communicate in a clear language and form.

4 Johny Pitts' *Afropean*

In *Afropean*, Johny Pitts takes his readers on a journey through "black Europe" and renders visible many of the liminal identities and communities to a broader audience. But his comparatively linear trip from city to city is also a personal endeavor because Pitts tries to find the outlines of the larger Afropean community he belongs to, or in his words, "a tribe that might feel like home" (72). Simultaneously, Pitts emphasizes the vicarious nature of his journey as a means to empower people with a similar background to his, or offer white Europeans an insight into the hidden African presence on the continent. Considering the more pragmatic orientation, Pitts exhibits none of Vollmann's playfulness and instead offers a rather straightforward representation of his experiences. Nevertheless, he remains a critical and self-reflective observer who accounts for the biases that arise from his goal-oriented and activist journalism. As in the previous chapter, I will first discuss the role of the narrator and how it accommodates the work's greater agenda. Next, I will analyze the personal nature of Pitts' journey through Europe, followed by an examination of his cultural influences. Lastly, I will touch upon the relevance of his embodied, black standpoint and elaborate on his journalistic methods.

4.1 The Narrator/Author as Activist

Pitts makes use of an overt narrator who discloses his background and the motivations that made him embark on his journey. While the travels are personally motivated, Pitts emphasizes that his quest for community should also empower others who are similarly marginalized, and thus his work has a strong activist element. To reach audiences beyond an elitist circle, Pitts therefore consciously chooses a more accessible form and keeps narrative experimentations at a minimum. Likewise, for his activism to achieve credibility, the text asks us to identify the narrator with the real Johny Pitts and not some narrative construct.

From the very beginning of his work, Pitts situates his narrator. In the book's prologue he writes: "I was born black, working class and northern in Margaret Thatcher's Britain" (11). By using these labels, he indicates that he understands his minority experiences as part of a larger social trend instead of focusing on individualist categories like Vollmann does. Accordingly, Pitts presents his work as a product of his social background—it is "an independent black working-class journey" (6)—and not as the result of some artistic genius divided from material circumstances. For that reason, he does not want us to see his travels as purely personally motivated but argues that they can be exemplary for the whole community. He writes:

> Looking back at all the violence and death and realizing it wasn't necessarily normal made me want to travel in the name of those who couldn't, or didn't – the working-class black community and children of immigrants – in search of a Europe both they and I might recognize as our own. (30)

The quotation suggests that the incentives for the journey do not only revolve around himself, but he is hoping to find a version of Europe the whole community can tap into. Pitts' stated commitment to serve the interests of those who could not do similar travels therefore points to the activist ambitions Pitts wants to pursue with his work.

In order to reach said community, Pitts dissociates himself from the academic research on the African European experience since it is "written or cited more often by wealthy, educated white scholars than the people being written about and couched in a stand-offish academic vernacular" (5). With his own work, on the other hand, he tries to engage with a larger readership beyond academic circles. Because it is straightforward yet provides him with enough analytical depth to voice his reflections, Pitts uses the travel reportage as the suitable cultural form. As he puts it himself: "This work is an attempt to use on-the-ground travel reportage as a way to wriggle free from the pressures of theory and honestly reveal the secret pleasures and prejudices of others as well as myself" (6). And although the travel reportage usually describes a succession of unique events, Pitts insists that his work should be seen as an "effort to begin with the personal in order to arrive at the universal" (6), and thus he endows his observations with more universally valid knowledge claims. With the travel reportage, Pitts then invokes a genre that should be more accessible yet grant him sufficient room for exploring various issues.

To further analyze the narrative situation, we can examine how Pitts constructs and presents himself in and beyond his work. Once again, the distinction between a narrator's posture and ethos will prove useful. In *Afropean*, Pitts fashions himself as a spokesperson for the black working-class community. The ethos associated with his posture is the value of his outsider's voice, both in terms of representation but also possible knowledge claims the perspective allows for. Simultaneously, the work's strong activist elements ask us to evaluate it not necessarily in terms of accuracy, but a suitable yardstick could be, for example, whether it fosters a better understanding of Afropean communities. For it to be epistemologically responsible, what matters most are therefore its capacities to empower rather than a scrupulous adherence to facts. And while the notion of posture calls attention to how an author constructs themselves and thus again vindicates a separation between author and narrator, in *Afropean* the

contrast between the two is not as marked because Pitts' persona extends well beyond the individual work. For example, in *Afropean* Pitts writes about his encounter with the author Caryl Phillips. However, in an earlier published article in the literary journal *ariel*, Pitts already described the very same encounter in similar terms and would later reuse whole text fragments. Since the genre of academic writing focuses on clarity instead of aesthetic experience and further tends to discourage artistic experimentation, we can assume that we are dealing more directly with the author of a text than a narrator. Because of the repetition, the voice that arguably belongs to Pitts is therefore also present in *Afropean*. Moreover, if Pitts should construct a persona for the article as well, we should then see this process of self-construction more broadly as how Pitts presents himself to the public. His consistency is in strong contrast to the different types of narrators Vollmann employs throughout his oeuvre and thus suggests that Pitts' posture should not be seen as a narrative device but as a central part of his self-presentation.

Considering the book's activist agenda, we can further argue that his attempts to empower strengthen and even condition the contingency of author and narrator. In the paratextual section "About the Author," we learn that Pitts "is the curator of the online journal Afropean.com" (ii), and in the introduction he writes himself, "I also encourage anybody dissatisfied with the voids I was unable to fill to contribute to the ongoing conversations on Afropean.com" (9–10). Since his activism transgresses the borders of the text and encourages people to contribute online, it seems too reductionist to confine it to a narrator's posture. Instead, for him to achieve credibility, one must assume that Pitts himself stands behind the prompts for participation, and thus the text asks us to consider the narrative voice as the voice of Pitts. It must be allowed that Pitts creates a certain posture and ethos around his working-class background; however, by pointing to his consistent public presence, I argued that it extends beyond *Afropean*, and consequently the separation of author and narrator becomes less pertinent.[16]

Given that it is one of Pitts' goals to reach a non-academic readership, it seems reasonable that his experiments in terms of form and narrative voice are more constrained than Vollmann's.[17] The representation of his experiences is therefore quite straightforward and chronologically follows his travels between the different European cities. Further, Pitts hardly

[16] Another example of Pitts' consistent public presence is his active Twitter profile [@johnypitts].

[17] In *Poor People*, Vollmann explicitly thematizes the inaccessibility of his works by admitting: "I have been told that my books are difficult to read. If that is so, then my readers must be people who do not mind difficult books" (287).

questions his own reliability as a narrator or destabilizes his voice through meta-commentary. What he does make occasional use of, through the separation of narrating and experiencing self, is to complement something he saw with additional information, like its historical context or intertextual references. For example, when in Paris' suburb Clichy-sous-Bois, Pitts spots some young black teenagers alongside an elderly white woman on the train. The narrating self then reflects: "I didn't know then that these were the demographics that made up much of the suburbs: the young and black shunted with the elderly and white, all of them poor and with common interests but distanced from each other by culture and politics" (66). Whereas Vollmann's narrating self at times disqualifies the judgment of the experiencing self, in Pitts' work they complement each other as he embeds his experiences within a demographic framework and adds a twist of Marxist dialectics. The intrusion of the narrating self is therefore kept at a minimum, and the immediacy of experience somewhat retained. As a result, Pitts' text is more stable regarding the meaning potentials that can emerge.

In view of the less challenging narratological situation in *Afropean*, we can argue quite commonsensically that the narrator asks to be considered the real Johny Pitts. Accordingly, he hardly questions textual boundaries, nor does he introduce a similar epistemological wariness as Vollmann. The focus on accessibility can be explained by Pitts' activism since he hopes to reach not only a small, educated number of readers. And also when it comes to Pitts' search for identity, he discloses the nature of his journey in a direct and less cryptic way as he explores Europe through the lens of the Afropean

4.2 The Quest for Community as Journalistic Bias

Because Pitts concerns himself with questions of identity through a communal perspective, his personal journey does not lead to a solitary retreat but to an embrace of community. And since this African European community does not exist as a self-consolidated entity, his search for identity is simultaneously an attempt at community building. As a conceptual foundation, Pitts draws on the portmanteau label "Afropean," which ought to reconcile both the African and European and allows him to see himself as "whole and unhyphenated" (Pitts 1). He writes that it served him as "a departure point of investigation and what [he] hoped would be [his] destination—a coherent, shared black European experience" (342). We can therefore see Afropean as a lens through which Pitts sees and organizes his experience. Nevertheless, he remains open and revises the concept based on his encounters with people who challenge existing ideas. Simultaneously, it proves strong enough to repel views that fall outside its applicability. Owing to this approach, Pitts is no objective and disinterested observer, but his

motives result in an openly biased journalism where the label Afropean structures his understanding of events.

Two concrete examples illustrate how Pitts perceives the world not as a detached observer but refracted through the lens of Afropean. On his first stop in Paris, he describes encountering an angry crowd of black protestors, "all dressed in black streamlined clothes" and emitting an "angry but composed intellectual black power." Mesmerized by their organized performance, Pitts writes that in them he sees the "positive interplay of cultures [he'd] originally been hoping to find: people who were at once French and black and yet represented something that didn't lend itself to hyphenation" (59). Rather than envisioning them as a singular event—an isolated protest movement—he recognizes in their unity the outlines of a larger self-conscious and politically organized unit that can serve as a model for the Afropean community. And according to Pitts, also spaces can embody the ideal of Afropean: when entering the shop "Rinkeby Bazaar" in Sweden, he comments that the "gross-looking ingredients" could in the right hands be turned into a delicious meal, to which he adds: "I knew this because I was home – if Afropea could be found anywhere, it was in a store like this one." He then moves from the specific to the general by writing that the store, "nestled in the snow fifteen kilometres from Stockholm, was exactly the same as those that can be found all over Europe, that help power up the appetites of weary brown-skinned outsiders" (235). In the store, Pitts recognizes a transcendental Afropean quality, which points to the existence of a somewhat larger, coherent culture that extends beyond national borders. "Rinkeby Bazaar" is therefore not important to Pitts through its specificity, but instead it stands metonymically for the larger Afropean culture. Because he invokes Afropean as a lens through which he sees the world, his observations can thus not be reduced to what they appear on the surface, but they unfold their meaning as parts of an imaginary whole, the Afropean community he hopes to discover.

However, Pitts does not apply Afropean very rigidly, and trying to avoid imposing his preconceived ideals onto his observations, he re-evaluates the framing device in view of new experiences. On his second stop in Belgium, for example, he visits a concert by the singer Marie Daulne, who coined the term Afropean. As he enters the concert hall, Pitts is appalled by the diverse crowd:

> I was confronted with an interpretation of the 'Afropean' I wasn't necessarily prepared for. There were a lot of dreads, mainly flowing from the heads of white women, some of whom had their locks wrapped up in colourful African fabric. They looked like

> anthropology lecturers who were living the dream – having sex with their subjects – and they clutched the arms of their indifferent black boyfriends with pride. (93)

His first impression is far from positive. On the contrary, he is highly suspicious of the white women appropriating African culture. But once Marie enters the stage, Pitts is caught himself by the frenzy of her performance and notices that the audience has been "lost in a state of Afropea; class, race and status didn't matter here, in this magical atmosphere Marie had called into existence." Due to the transformational experience that forced Pitts to address his own prejudices, he reconsiders his understanding of Afropean: "When I set out on my trip I had hoped to find Afropea in the physical geography of Europe, but after watching Marie Daulne perform and how it made the crowd behave I realized that the dream of an Afropean utopia had to be found first in the realm of ideas" (94). Her performance made Pitts rethink Afropean from a descriptive category to a utopic ideal, and thus he changed the framework through which he tries to understand his journey.

Another way we can conceptualize the Afropean community as an ideal is through the concept of imagined communities, which was first introduced by Benedict Anderson. Although Anderson uses the notion in connection with nation states, we can also apply it to understand Pitts' engagement with the Afropean diaspora community. According to Anderson, the sheer size of a nation makes it impossible for all its constituents to ever interact with each other, and therefore its cohesion must be founded upon an imagined unity, for example in the form of traditions or a common historical narrative (6–7). Hall partially adopts Anderson's framework when he talks about the formation of cultural identities in diaspora communities and distinguishes between two different approaches. On the one hand, Hall argues that such cultural identity can be conceptualized as a return to one's "true self," which has to be uncovered amidst the "more superficial imposed 'selves'" that have been created through colonization and displacement. And since communities are imagined, this process necessarily requires an act of "imaginative rediscovery," for example when an Afro-Caribbean community reclaims its African heritage ("Cultural Identity" 444). While this approach is empowering, Hall adds that it requires the belief in a "universal and transcendental spirit inside us on which history has made no fundamental mark," and thus he suggests a second approach that acknowledges the differences created by the historical ruptures (446). Based on this second approach, the formation of cultural identity in diaspora communities should not be seen as a return to some essentialist identity but rather as a "becoming" that accepts the "continuous 'play' of history, culture, and power" (445). In a similar vein, Pitts writes that Marie did not just represent the

African, but on stage she sang “her culture into existence” by working with a mixture of African and European traditions (95). The emphasis on becoming therefore points to Pitts’ understanding of the Afropean community, which is not founded on essentialist qualities but acknowledges the transformational changes and constant state of flux.

While in some instances Pitts readily adapts his ideas, he is also confronted with African European identities which the Afropean cannot accommodate. Especially challenging are the standpoints on the periphery that either deny the transformations inflicted by the colonial past or dispute any affiliation with Africa whatsoever. For example, in Berlin he talks with Mohammed, who denies identifying with Europe and instead insists on his essentialist African traits. He argues that Africans are naturally lazy because the continent provided them with abundant resources, whereas Europeans were faced with harsher living conditions and thus became hardworking and exploitative (184). And because of his racial essentialism, Mohammed does not see himself as part of an Afropean community but subscribes to an exclusively African heritage and destiny. He explains to Pitts: “One day the black king shall return and take . . . all these black men you see here and around Europe back home to Africa to build a great nation” (189). By invoking a “black king” taking them “home to Africa,” Mohammed dissociates himself from everything European and sees his “true self” in being African. While admitting the lure of such narratives, Pitts distances himself from his close-minded views and instead sees his own “becoming” connected to the European continent. Hence, he ponders what “the black king would do with those of us who are mixed race and/or feeling mixed-cultured” (189). Seeing himself as Afropean, Pitts cannot make use of this “imaginative rediscovery” that purely focuses on African culture and myths, but he needs to fall back on distinctly Afropean narratives and role models.

On the other end of the spectrum lies Lucille, a woman Pitts meets in Stockholm for a conversation, and who advocates for a complete assimilation into European society at the expense of the African. She is of mixed heritage yet grew up in a wealthy area, and according to Pitts, “first and foremost . . . considered herself Swedish” (223). In their conversation, she reveals to him:

> ‘People in Rinkeby, even of the second generation, absolutely refuse to lose their immigrant accent. . . . I don’t understand why they don’t take the time to learn Swedish language and culture properly and take part in society,’ she said, again with that arrogantly raised eyebrow. (224)

Pitts is no objective observer and disagrees with her hostile attitude toward migrant culture by retorting that an accent can be "an act of defiance against a society that refuses to let you truly blend in because of your skin colour" and is also a means to "remembering where you came from" (225). Thereby, he clearly rejects her assimilationist stance, which does not allow room for African influences except in superficial forms such as her "large Afro" or the "retro-soul influenced knitwear" (223). As the examples show, Pitts is ready to adjust the lens through which he sees and naturalizes the world. All the same, his conceptual framework remains strong enough to exclude views that are not compatible with his vision of Afropean, such as the reliance on an exclusively African identity or the complete assimilation within European culture. His restraint demonstrates that he is serious about the concept as a tool to understand the world and is therefore unwilling to bend and distort it to increase its applicability to the detriment of precision.

On his journey, Pitts is equipped with a preconceived idea of what he wants to find. However, his biases are not a hidden agenda, but he makes the exploration of Afropean to a central theme of his work. While initially describing Afropean as a descriptive category, Pitts expands it to an ideal one can aspire to. In the work's closing paragraphs, he returns to the conceptual discussion and reassesses the meaning of Afropean: "scattered fragments of Afropean experience had formed a mosaic inside my mind, not monolithic, but not entirely amorphous either; rather, the Afropean reality was a bricolage of blackness and I'd experienced an Africa that was both *in* and *of* Europe" (380). The quotation suggests that Pitts has achieved a stronger and more inclusive understanding of the Afropean community he belongs to, and thus his search for identity is complete. In comparison, objective journalists can also be biased and have preconceived notions of their finished product; however, since they are not granted the same degree of self-reflectivity, these factors cannot be acknowledged and thus exert their influences latently. Pitts could find elements of Afropean through personal encounters on his travels, but his work is simultaneously an intellectual journey as he engages with a vast range of literatures and histories that form part of a wider Afropean culture.

4.3 Rendering a Culture Visible

To make sense of the experiences on his journey, Pitts contextualizes them within their larger historical and cultural trajectory. This is necessary because the various European countries hardly acknowledge their own colonial past, and therefore neither the cultural canon nor the education system can offer Afropean role models or historical narratives that support an Afropean identity. By engaging with various literary figures of African descent or unveiling

the ignored influence of Afropean histories on Europe, Pitts creates an alternative cultural repository into which he and others can tap into. It is then no surprise that Pitts identifies texts by other Afropean authors as influences on the form and language of his own work. And besides sustaining his activism, his cultural engagement also turns Pitts into a more perceptive and thus better journalist.

First, we should account for the cultural context in which Pitts moves and writes. He explains that in almost all European countries he visited, there exists a "historical amnesia" that suppresses their involvement in colonialism and thus their shared past with the African continent (216). To support his claim, Pitts cites the scholar Fatima El-Tayeb who expands Europe's blindness to the concept of race: "To reference race as native to contemporary European thought … violates the powerful narrative of Europe as a colour-blind continent" (160). But ignoring race does not eradicate racism, and instead it can continue to exist covertly. David Theo Goldberg argues that, historically, anti-racist movements all over the world tended to be taken over, after initial successes, by "antiracialist" efforts—the idea of doing away with race as a concept altogether. Although removing the category that has been the foundation for exploitation and discrimination might seem progressive at first glance, the consequences are more dire. Goldberg argues that "[a]ntiracism requires historical memory, recalling the conditions of racial degradation," whereas "antiracialism suggests forgetting," and hence it "seeks to wipe out the terms of reference, to wipe away the very vocabulary necessary to recall and recollect" (21). Despite real success in anti-racist movements, Europe's tendency towards antiracialism undermines further progress because the historical damages the categories caused remain unacknowledged while its color-blindness takes away the vocabulary to understand and fight the still existing racism. As a consequence, it becomes a "racism without race, racism gone private, . . . a racism whose history is lost" (23). It is therefore precisely through Europe's unwillingness to accept the notion of race that racism can still persist but now unacknowledged and deprived of its historical trajectory.

Pitts' on-the-ground reportage confirms these sentiments. For example, in his conversation with one of the black activists he met in Paris, the latter explains that France is often perceived as a racially tolerant country, but only because the racism "is so subtle here. You can't touch it. You can't measure the dirty stares, the racist comments and the alienation" (78). Racism is removed from an official and quantifiable level, but it continues to exist latently and is thus scarcely identified or fought. As an example, the historical amnesia that comes with antiracialist policies questions the very legitimacy of black communities on the European continent. And apart from neglecting due representation, Pitts argues that European

historiography is consciously distorted by the dominant group. He brings up how French colonial subjects made up two thirds of Charles de Gaulle's liberating army to free the "motherland" from Nazi occupation. Nonetheless, for the photographs that were taken in the liberated Paris, they were all removed to create the impression that the capital was reconquered by white soldiers (80). The implications of such exclusion, in Goldberg's words, are that "no history of and from them means their absence from the (ethno)national history that is taken to make up the society's frame of reference, its sense of itself," and as a consequence, they "are deemed to have no claim not simply on national remembrance but on the nation-state itself" (24). Therefore, Europe's color-blindness does not only render the existing racism invisible, but it questions the very legitimacy of black communities on the continent. From a political standpoint, it should thus be desirable to retain race as a category so Afropeans can make a claim on national identity, gain political representation, and fight racial injustices. And also from a journalistic perspective, objective reporting hardly seems to be the right cultural form to address such issues, as subtle racism is too ephemeral a phenomenon to be translated into easily representable facts and hence used as part of its vocabulary.

The exclusion from European societies also has psychological effects on the identities of black individuals and communities. Since the hegemonic European culture downplays the historical and cultural impact of African Europeans, racially marginalized groups often find themselves historically uprooted and lacking role models they can identify with. Pitts illustrates this lack when he compares the intangible Afropean presence in Europe with the well-established, highly visible Afro-American culture:

> We have no Martin Luther Kings or Malcolm Xs. We have Frantz Fanons and Stuart Halls but, unlike the way the American Dream integrated the civil-rights movement into its own mythology, our heroes aren't overtly embedded in the narrative of European history and identity. Maybe that's a good thing, meaning the stories aren't commodified and stripped of their power, but it does mean they often reach us too late or not at all, absent from our formative years and our deeply entrenched ideas about 'authentic' national identity. (268)

Because potential Afropean role models are not accepted into Europe's cultural canon, and in extension not taught in schools or disseminated through other channels, Pitts argues that they remain out of reach to many. Therefore, they do not become part of the continent's cultural consciousness, and African Europeans have little choice than to subscribe to a national identity

that excludes and thus alienates them or renounce any affiliation altogether. In America, on the other hand, Pitts contends that black identities are rooted in historical narratives and not as floating as their European counterparts. He emphasizes this difference more strongly when he describes encountering his Afro-American co-travelers on a guided tour through Paris: "I felt culturally flimsy, as though my identity was vague and half formed . . . my English accent lacking substance when talking about black identity and theirs thronged with experience, their intonations carrying more explicitly historical narratives of blackness" (36–37). The quotation highlights Pitts' insecurity concerning his black identity since Europe's historical amnesia cannot provide him with the "historical narratives of blackness" to back it up, whereas the more overt handling of the Afro-American history provides them with a more self-assured understanding of their community.

In view of Europe's color-blindness, we can better understand how Pitts mobilizes an alternative body of myths, histories, and role models as a way of resisting the hegemonic culture and imagining a distinctly Afropean identity. As one of many examples, Pitts discusses the African heritage of the Russian poet Alexander Pushkin, whose great-grandfather was a black slave: "In him I saw a sort of kindred spirit of the liminal terrain, rooted in Russia but at a poetic distance from it, too; an Afropean wanderer with a story other Afropeans could tap into" (267–68). By making Pushkin's African heritage present, Pitts expands the circle of role models both he and other Afropeans can "tap into." And although he does often not engage with his sources in-depth, his meandering, intertextual conversations can serve as an entry point for readers to embark on similar intellectual journeys through reading up on his recommendations.

Due to his emphasis on a distinctly Afropean culture, Pitts locates his literary influences not in the standard Western canon but points to authors who share his liminal subjectivity. He admits his literary indebtedness most openly when referring to Caryl Phillips' work *The European Tribe* (1987), which he calls one of few "direct precursors to this book" (116). Like Pitts, Phillips struggled with coming to terms with his identity as a black man in Europe and therefore embarked on a similar journey of self-exploration, albeit with a focus on the dominant white culture. On his several stops, he meets European society both through first-hand encounters and engages with its culture—especially its treatment of the other. To a degree, Pitts mirrors this cultural form and synthesizes the various individual observations on his stops into an enriched understanding of himself and Afropean. In fact, *Afropean* seems to directly answer Phillips' instruction to "dig deep for the evidence of our equally great contribution [to

Europe], and cling to it in the face of ignorance" (Phillips 128) by unearthing and engaging with the various achievements of African and African European people.

The question of cultural form can also be explored through a broader perspective since both Phillips and Pitts draw on a tradition of travel writing that has its roots in the beginning of the Romantic period. In her work *Pleasure and Guilt on the Grand Tour*, Chloe Chard argues that towards the end of the nineteenth-century two distinct ways of imagining traveling emerged that still shape our understanding today: whereas the tourist approach tries to keep the foreign at bay, the more romantic approach sees travel as a "form of personal adventure, holding out the promise of a discovery or realization of the self through the exploration of the other" (11). In their writing, both Phillips and Pitts subscribe to such a romantic approach, as through their encounters with the other they hope to achieve an enriched understanding of the self. But although Pitts admits the Romantic influence on how he understands the trope of the traveler, he tries to break free from the dependence on exclusively Western traditions. Thus, he compares his journey with that of the "legendary Moroccan traveller Ibn Battuta, perhaps the most famous non-white travel writer in a genre saturated by white men," which is "an account of a North African *flâneur* and sightseer travelling for fun, knowledge and adventure" (375). Even if we can see the reference primarily as a symbolic act, Pitts nevertheless tries to reclaim the genre as a cultural form with a wider trajectory and thus reduce his reliance on Western cultural forms for construing meaning and naturalizing the world. This discussion about genre has shown that Pitts exhibits an awareness for the form of his text, which is not supposed to be a mirror of reality but rather offers him a platform to structure his experiences and explore their potential meanings.

Returning to Pitts' discussion of Phillips, we can note that the latter's influence is not only present on a formal level. Instead, Pitts reveals that through his works he found a suitable language to express his feelings as a racial minority. In the previously mentioned essay where he describes his encounter with Phillips, he argues: "His work contains sentence after sentence that made tangible my own loose and half formed ideas—the vague notions about my black identity that I didn't know how to express using the education I'd been given" ("Daffodils" 40). From the quotation, we understand that the hegemonic education Pitts received could not provide him with a language to formulate and express his "half formed ideas." However, he found the language to make them "tangible" in the works of another African European author who had undergone a similar experience like him. Such linguistic inadequacy can once again be explained by Europe's color blindness, which tends to remove "the very vocabulary necessary to recall and collect, to make a case" (Goldberg 21). Similarly, the fact-based and

often critically unexamined language journalists use proves ill-suited to describe the lives of the marginalized and invisible. Through an enriched understanding of the everyday lives of various minorities, for example through reading literature, journalists can therefore expand their language and thereby enrich their perception.

If we compare Pitts' use of intertextuality to how Vollmann engages with other works, their diametrically opposed starting points crystalize. I have shown how Europe struggles to acknowledge its colonial past and thus excludes the African influence on its history and culture, which is to the detriment of minorities like Pitts. Vollmann, on the other hand, is part of the predominantly white American culture. His use of sources is far from revolutionary, but instead he engages with, and to a degree revitalizes, a distinctly American canon. Even his invocation of the Chinese poet Cold Mountain is mediated through the admission that he has been "Americanize[d] and even Californiaize[d]" (95) before him, and hence he becomes part of the American cultural canon. While one can try to ascribe Vollmann's selection to a cultural narrow-mindedness, I do not deem this characterization very accurate because he is known from other works for his cultural openness and engagement with a broad spectrum of foreign and indigenous sources. Instead, the used sources suggest a conscious return to an almost mythical American past, on which he falls back to resist the contemporary USA. For Pitts, on the other hand, such a clearly defined cultural canon he can resort to for spiritual empowerment does not exist in the first place. Therefore, creating alternative narratives entails that he excavates and explores different histories, literatures, or cultural artifacts. Or to use a metaphor: while Vollmann can rely on a well-maintained archive, Pitts must create such archive himself by rummaging through related archives, searching for sources, and collecting data on his travels.

I argued that Europe's lacking racial consciousness does not lead to a more equal society but results in an invisible racism and the exclusion of racial minorities from national identity. Through uncovering various lesser-known Afropean figures and historical narratives, Pitts counters this trend and strengthens the Afropean cultural identity. Moreover, in accordance with his own principles, Pitts locates his literary influences with other Afropean authors such as Caryl Phillips. But the engagement with different, non-hegemonic sources can also have journalistic benefits, as issues like invisible racism are subtle and can hardly be grasped, let alone described, by the fact-oriented objective journalism. By discussing other activists, authors, and scholars, Pitts gains a sharpened perception and richer vocabulary to both understand his own subjectivity as a racial minority and to contextualize his observations not as isolated facts but within the larger framework of Afropean culture. However, since race

hardly enters public discourse, or in Pitts' words, "my blackness was lived at home, in the street, at the barber's, through vernacular culture, but was largely absent in any place of study or officialdom" (37), it can prove insufficient to study different cultural artifacts, and instead his project demands an immersive reporting that facilitates a more embodied type of knowledge.

4.4 "The Black Gaze"

In the analysis of *Riding*, I borrowed the term emic from anthropology to describe how Vollmann adopts the worldview of the people he interviews. This model is accompanied by an implicit separation between observer and observed as it remains a scientific method assumed by a scientist and is therefore not a genuine change of mind. Pitts, on the other hand, does not pretend to adopt the point of view of the people he encounters but repeatedly emphasizes his own black, working-class identity. Thus, he already sees the world from a marginalized standpoint that can provide new and challenging types of insights. Since the separation between scientist and object of study seems to be inappropriate for Pitts' work, I borrow the term "black gaze" (Pitts 117) to account for his embodied perspective on the world.[18] Having argued for abandoning the emic, I will first elaborate on how his background can give him a better vantage point to understand various issues and how his mere bodily presence evokes reactions from the environment—both hostile and sympathetic. But despite his embodiment proving a source for knowledge, it can also cause epistemological disadvantages as, for example, his fear and ignorance of Russia make it difficult for him to overcome Western stereotypes. Finally, when Pitts meets students who are from Africa themselves and only spend a few years in Europe, his knowledge claims through a shared background are rendered impossible.

Pitts argues that because of his minority background, he can see and understand issues that remain invisible to a more privileged observer. He puts it as follows: "growing up feeling that I was between cultures had made me more sensitive to notions of identity and belonging than I would have been had I not been born with the gift of exile" (98). These claims echo the principles of feminist standpoint theory as Harding suggests that one's activities "both organize and set limits on what persons who perform such activities can understand about themselves and the world around them" (442). His personal experiences provide a suitable "starting point for thought" since marginalized voices tend to be "devalued or ignored as a source of

[18] The concept of embodied knowledge plays a central role in feminist standpoint theory and is accompanied by rich conceptual discussions, however, I apply it in its unqualified form to describe how Pitts' cultural background but also his skin color can grant him different access to information.

objectivity-maximizing questions" (442, 443). Therefore, his standpoint can be a valuable journalistic resource that influences how he perceives the world. For example, when he is in public spaces, Pitts frequently notices the lack of black representation or the distorted teaching of history. Thus, in the Belgian national museum, he notices: "As someone with enslaved people in my ancestry, I've always found such complete classical European beauty more than a little unsettling . . . and every time I visited a place like this I couldn't help but look at it and wonder whose blood had to be shed" (109). The example shows that Pitts can tap into his personal experiences as a resource to reflect on the effects issues like underrepresentation can have on Afropeans and therefore make use of an embodied knowledge that is not available to a detached journalist.

Next to a keen eye for representation, something which can arguably be acquired as well, Pitts' black body also provokes reactions from his environment. These first-hand encounters provide a starting point for reflection and can be representative of other people's experiences inhabiting the same spaces. To give an example, Pitts describes how in a train station in Brussels he starts a conversation with a group of white backpackers. However, after a short while, two suspicious security men approach him "with stern faces," wanting to see his passport. Being subjected to racial profiling, Pitts reflects: "a moment I felt that I was one of the young international jet-setters, . . . then suddenly I was brought back down to earth, different, a black threat to their white safety" (89). As Pitts moves through the environment, his bodily presence elicits reactions that can reveal lurking racial biases, which would otherwise have remained hidden. His embodiment thus enables knowledge claims that are denied to, for example, a white journalist—no matter how reflective they are. For the environment and themes Pitts is exploring, the notion of a detached observer therefore makes little sense, and instead his physical appearance constitutes a central factor in his journalism.

Besides provoking resistance, his black presence also gives him privileged access to various types of communities and interview partners. It is in Russia, arguably the place Pitts perceives as the most racist, where the connection between his blackness and accessibility is illustrated best. When he strolls through the streets of Moscow, a black man in a czar outfit tries to lure him into a souvenir shop. Although he initially puts on a show, after Pitts inquires whether it is safe for him to study in Russia, he "took [Pitts] to the side and dropped his song-and-dance act, looking at [him] seriously and saying, 'Brother is fucked here. In last three weeks they kill two blacks from Ghana." Yet as soon as the man's boss approaches, Pitts describes that "his expression turned from one of desperate anxiety to desperate jolliness again: 'Come have a look, we make a good price for you'" (275). His transformation from forced

jolliness to the cautionary tone once their conversation is semi-private indicates how the shared minority struggle, or participation in the same imaginary community, gives Pitts a boost in trust and thus access to sensitive and potentially life-saving information a non-black journalist might not receive. Pitts' embodiment can therefore be seen as a tool for him to get access to marginalized communities who would otherwise be reluctant to speak to an outsider.[19]

But if we subscribe to Harding's claim that "some social situations are scientifically better than others" for specific knowledge projects (450), we must also acknowledge that Pitts' positionality might be less suited to address other issues. While his own experiences as a minority can therefore help him understand the lives of the marginalized or relativize stereotypes society has about them, he is poorly equipped to challenge his own stereotypes. When visiting Russia, his narration is overshadowed by the country's xenophobic reputation, and the resulting fear saturates his perception. For example, there is an encounter where an unmarked car starts following the wandering Pitts, and as he sees a bald man behind the steering wheel and recalls having heard that "Neo-Nazis used to kidnap African students . . . masquerading as taxi drivers" (257), he briskly walks away, hiding the Afro that gave away his racial background under his hood. Naturally, it would be irresponsible for Pitts in such a situation to enter the car; however, the justified concerns for his safety simultaneously deny him the opportunity to delve deeper into society, and their potential encounter remains, at last, a projection of his fears.

Even though Pitts acknowledges that his perception of Russia equals a stereotype, "spun by the West and regurgitated to [him] as propaganda" (256), he admits his inability to ever snap out of his Western gaze. Upon arriving in Saint Petersburg, he describes that the airport staff was "fascinatingly rude," that "70s-looking Lada cars (which . . . were still being manufactured, apparently)" filled the streets, and that "someone strolled past me walking a brown bear – yes, I swear: a *bear*" (256). Through indicators like "fascinatingly" or "apparently," but also his assurance that he in fact saw a bear, Pitts expresses his astonishment at the other and characterizes Russia as fundamentally different—something he has refrained from with the other countries' idiosyncrasies. Based on these cues, we can argue that Pitts sees Russia through a Western gaze, a concept derived from Edward Said's theorization of the Orient. According to Said, the Orient has been "Orientalized" by the West through a hegemonic process that robbed it of its own identity and replaced it with a "battery of desires, repressions,

[19] One can speculate that people's reluctance to talk with journalists in this environment has to do with a precarious residence status, and thus they would try not to draw attention to themselves.

investments, and projections" (5,7). Similarly, Pitts sees Russia through a frame that confirms Western stereotypes instead of actively seeking out counter-hegemonic impressions. He admits this distortion of reality himself when he writes, "I kept waiting for the dramatic clichéd images I had of it to burst, and they never really did" (256). Although one can interpret his statement that Russia is indeed reducible to a stereotype, given Pitts' otherwise critical perspective, it seems more likely that he critiques his own standpoint and admits his inability to overcome the Western gaze. This second interpretation is supported by Pitts' realization that he "really [knew] absolutely nothing about contemporary Russia, the language, the cuisine, the customs, the history" (256).[20] Thus, we can conclude that Pitts' standpoint proves inadequate to receive a deeper insight into Russian culture and penetrate through his Western gaze. However, as Vollmann has done so often, by signaling his epistemological ineptitude, he admits the heavily mediated nature of his impressions and thereby relativizes his truth claims.

It is also in Russia that his knowledge through a shared background with other minorities is put to the test. Hitherto, Pitts mostly encountered people with African descent who settled down in Europe and are therefore somewhat invested in an Afropean identity. And since they inhabit similar worlds, Pitts' own experiences served as a good basis to understand the shared "structures of signification," to borrow a phrase from Clifford Geertz (9), which permeate their daily lives and activities. But when Pitts visits the People's Friendship University in Moscow, he meets students who grew up in Africa and only stay in Russia for a few years to finish their degrees yet have no shared interest in an Afropean identity, nor does the label "black" have any significance to them. He writes:

> most of the people I spoke to weren't interested, and when I tried to speak politically, as if to say, *I'm black, you're black, and I want to hear your story*, I realized that blackness wasn't such a huge conundrum to them. They had been in Russia studying for maybe a couple of years, and in the country they had come from were politicians, policemen and teachers who all looked just like they did, which meant that on a day-to-day basis being 'black' was largely as banal as being white in Europe. They weren't black students, they were just students, on tour and studying in a bit of a horrible place to get qualifications they needed to pursue their chosen career paths, and though it's true that I saw these students as black, it made me feel less sure of my own blackness

[20] Pitts' hasty research on Russia is further reflected in his erroneous description of "Palmira being an old name for St Petersburg" (258).

> than ever before, and less sure about the usefulness of any label when searching to understand my own identity or that of a community. (280–81)

As the quotation shows, Pitts' appeal to the imagined community fails because being black is hardly a concern for the African students, and thus they remain unmoved to talk to him. Their lack of a shared background makes it both more difficult for Pitts to engage in a conversation or understand their experiences in Europe. Moreover, since they are not from a place where their blackness stands out or is a cause for discrimination, they do not use the label to define themselves, such as Pitts does. This encounter makes him question the usefulness of labels to describe himself, and in the face of the destabilizing experience in Russia, he concludes: "I also felt as Western European as I ever have, and couldn't wait to leave" (282). Through his reflection, Pitts points to the constructed nature of the very labels he has been employing to understand himself and shows that they only make sense when contrasted to something else. Surrounded by African students in a country that is foreign to him, he sticks out as distinctly Western European.

For his journalism, Pitts' minority background proves an asset since his standpoint allows him to make knowledge claims a privileged and detached observer does not have access to, whether it is because of the different background or the reactions of the environment to his black presence. Simultaneously, we need to acknowledge that his perspective can prove disadvantageous for other types of inquiries, as his stay in Russia illustrated. He addresses this by openly discussing his inadequacies and thereby hedging his truth claims and providing transparency. And also when it comes to questions of journalism, I will show how Pitts extends this transparency to his methods and interactions with various conversation partners.

4.5 Facts, Their Context, and Embedment in Narrative

Traveling through Europe and exploring the Afropean community, most of Pitts' encounters are not preplanned but take place by chance, or at least through Pitts' making opportunities of chance. Since he provides the context surrounding his encounters, readers receive a deeper insight into his research process and can assess his conversation partners themselves. And because he is not a detached but highly committed observer, he often discloses his active and sometimes manipulative role in conversations. On a more general note, through embedding his observations within a narrative arc, Pitts invests them with symbolic meanings that go beyond their factual status. Like Vollmann's work, *Afropean* then features two distinct truth claims that are based on literary and journalistic standards. Finally, Pitts' use of photography seems

to have more of an illustrative function and therefore contributes comparatively little to strengthening his truth claims.

Reporting from his travels, Pitts comments on the circumstances leading up to his encounters. For example, when he observes the earlier mentioned demonstration in Paris, he ends up following a "group of tall, imposing black men" and eventually gets hold of their leader, Rex Kadi. Their initial interaction then leads to an interview, as Pitts writes that he "managed to get Rex's number and, after a few texts back and forth, he said he would meet me" (63). The example offers some insight into Pitts' non-systematic working methods, which align him more with the figure of the *flâneur*, or the "Afropean *Flâneur*" (52), than an investigative journalist. Moreover, the disclosure of the events that precede his interviews offers background information that can help us evaluate his sources. In this case, it is not an official spokesperson for an organization but rather a chance encounter on the streets. Also with other conversation partners, Pitts tends to mention where he met them—often in hostels, restaurants, and other public spaces. Simultaneously, he admits when his background grants him privileged access, as for example in Portugal, he mentions that he found a guide for Lisbon's favela Cova da Moura through reaching out on his website (358). By revealing these processes, Pitts creates an impression of transparency and exposes how his text has been created through chance encounters with various people on his travels.[21]

Further, Pitts elaborates on his active role in interviews, as he is often not a sincere conversation partner but veils his intentions to generate the material he wants. Even if he can draw on a wider shared horizon with some of the people he talks to, his reporting is therefore not characterized by the same unbridled sincerity as Vollmann's. I mentioned the passage where Pitts lies to the black czar about being a prospective student in Moscow, and only by doing so could garner his trust. But most illustrative of his role as an intrusive observer is the chance encounter with the working-class woman Caroline in the Swedish metro. After some sympathetic small talk, she starts a xenophobic rant and claims that "it is all foreynjers coming here to take our jobs." Although Pitts feels the urge to disagree, he writes: "I wanted her to tell me how she really felt, so I egged her on, wanted more racism, more prejudice, more xenophobia, more things to write about." Thus, he answers emphatically: "Swedish people pay a *lot* of taxes, too, don't they!" (232), for which he gets rewarded with more quotable statements that are indeed printed in his work. The example points to his role as a participant who

[21] For the sake of completeness, we should note that despite the best efforts, Pitts still leaves some questions open, for example where he got his extensive circle of friends in Sweden from.

manipulates his environment to tease out otherwise hidden sentiments, and therefore he is a far stretch from the ideal of the objective, disinterested observer. While one can ethically question his deceit in regard to his interview partners, he behaves epistemically responsibly towards readers by disclosing his involvement.

Next to his reflections on the information gathering process, Pitts dwells on the act of mediation—that is, how he brings his experiences to paper. It can start with simple anecdotes from the reporting process, for example his methods of recording data. On the earlier mentioned tour through "black Paris" (35), Pitts talks a lot with the eccentric American Jimmy and writes that he was "trying to make sure [he] memorized everything he was saying to write down later" (50). Despite mentioning the approach only in an embedded clause, Pitts undermines the status of Jimmy's quotations as absolute facts. Instead, he qualifies them as mediated through his memory, and thereby they are exposed to possible distortions. Similarly, the process by which Pitts turns his notes into a finished product is far from straightforward. Towards the end of his travels, he addresses the reader directly by writing: "You're reading all this in the form of a neat little package, an edited book, probably with a fairly assured-looking author photograph of me on the back cover." However, he admits that this assuredness does not reflect his experiences at the time because the constant traveling has had a hold on him: "I'd begun talking to myself and some of my late-night travel notes were becoming increasingly oblique" (374). The bridging of the gap between the "neat little package" and Pitts' mental state during his travels can therefore be attributed to his mediation of the material—a process he draws attention to by revealing the contrast between experiencing and narrating self.

The issue of mediation can be expanded to how the text is structured on a more global level, and what implications this structure has on its meaning. Even though Pitts' work is a chronological description of his travels from city to city, his physical journey simultaneously supports the developing argument regarding the concept of Afropean since his experiences serve as entry points for the conceptual discussion or can serve as illustrations. We can understand the development of his argument better through the lens of Hans-Georg Gadamer's hermeneutics. Gadamer argues that all "all understanding inevitably involves some prejudice," as whenever we approach, for example, a text, our preconceptions of it influence our reception (724). In the process of understanding, we are therefore "always performing an act of projecting" because we impose our pre-understanding onto the text as a whole (722). Although *Afropean* describes a physical journey, we can also appreciate Pitts' work as a text through which he dialectically develops his interpretation of Afropean. His initial understanding of the

concept—“a coherent, shared black European experience” (Pitts 342)—then shapes how he comprehends his first encounters. Nevertheless, Pitts remains open to the “quality of newness” (Gadamer 723) and therefore incorporates challenging new experiences and reforms his understanding of Afropean, which in turn shapes his interpretative frame and thus his encounters with the world. In the work’s conclusion, the contrast between his point of departure and the revised understanding of Afropean becomes clear. Pitts writes that when planning his trip months before, he wanted to finish it “heroically at Europa point, from which, on a clear day, it was possible to stare at the shores of Africa” (373). Once he arrives though, he describes that thick clouds obstruct the view, and therefore he realizes: “I didn’t need to see the landmass of Africa looming emblematically in the distance to end my travels, because Africa was right where I was standing” (380). The concrete example then illustrates the destination of Pitts’ intellectual journey, and while his travels through Europe are indeed real, they simultaneously act as a structuring device that helps him develop the emerging argument.

Because *Afropean* features empirical descriptions but embeds them within a larger narrative, the text can accommodate two different types of truth claims: one based on empirical verifiability, the other on meanings that emerge from their function in the narration. If we use the same example as above, we can thus argue that events can assume both a literal and symbolic dimension. After his revelation at Europa point, Pitts finishes his book with the sentence: “Then, turning around to face the tumultuous old continent where I’d been born and raised, I went back to where I came from” (380). Located at the work’s ending, his turn can be understood as a symbolic act that provides narrative closure since the physical orientation toward Europe also illustrates Pitts’ reformed understanding of the Afropean identity. While this symbolic dimension does not transgress the “reality boundary” (Sims 11) or change the reliability of his statements, it adds another layer of meaning that is developed through the events’ embedment within the narrative arc. Recalling Morton’s distinction between the reproductive and productive imagination, we can add that through “embracing subjectivity” and synthesizing his experiences into a conclusive narrative, Pitts makes use of his productive imagination “to push into the symbolic realm” (“Imagination” 98). Such a resource is hardly available to objective journalists since forms like the inverted pyramid de-emphasize narration and tend to isolate facts as sole sources of meaning.

A comparative reading with Vollmann’s *Riding* can shed some more light on how the differences in their physical and intellectual journeys are mirrored in their texts’ structures. Even though both authors travel by train, Pitts accurately plans his connections in advance, as for example he writes: “From the comfort of my own home months earlier . . . I’d decided that

the last two days of my Interrail pass would be sufficient to make it from Lisbon to Gibraltar" (373). His rigid itinerary is reflected in the chronological development of his story, which offers narrative closure at Europa point. Vollmann, on the other hand, boards freight trains headed toward everywhere, or in other words, without knowing where they go, and thereby he surrenders control. His journey is not a linear one but disorienting, which is reflected in his fragmented and associative writing that blends different timelines, episodes, and encounters. As J.R. Moehringer puts it, like "one of his train hops, [*Riding*] is jarring, aimless, disrupted by arbitrary stops and starts." In comparison, Pitts' work follows a more straightforward development and leaves open few interpretative freedoms. His observations are firmly embedded within his narrative, and thus he can instrumentalize facts to support his overarching argument. *Riding*, on the other hand, hardly features a classic narrative arc, and accordingly, it can sustain a higher degree of ambiguity.

What Pitts also does is to disclose the material processes that led to the publication of his work, and thereby he delineates editorial influences on *Afropean*. Besides his repeated claims that his journey is "forged by independent black budget travel" (6), he describes how the book ended up being bought and distributed by the major publisher Penguin Books. After meeting his literary protégé Caryl Phillips, Pitts reveals: "you are holding this book because Caryl introduced me to Linton, who introduced me to his partner Sharmilla, who introduced me to my literary agent, Suresh, who sold my book to Penguin" (126). In the quotation, Pitts reconstructs the causal chain that led to *Afropean*'s publication. While it is not possible to discern what influences the deal with Penguin had on the final product after all, through the fact that he only got a book deal after his travels already started, and by writing that he sold "my book" and therefore puts the emphasis on a finished product, Pitts implies that the deal did not have a large influence on the book's content. He confirms this reading towards the end of his work when writing that he had "no researchers, and the publishing deal came later" (358).[22] By highlighting production circumstances, Pitts thus avoids presenting his work as a reified mirror of reality and insists on his freedom from institutional pressures when composing his text.

Finally, some words about Pitts' use of photography are due. Unlike in Vollmann's work, Pitts' monochrome photographs are not printed in the appendix but spread throughout

[22] His mischaracterization of Palmira as an old name for Saint Petersburg, for example, also suggests that *Afropean* has not gone through the same meticulous fact checking as *Riding*. However, somewhat contradictory information is given in the book's "Acknowledgements," where Pitts thanks "Cecilia Stein, who commissioned and developed this work" (389)

Afropean and thereby form an ongoing dialogue with his prose. Apart from some exceptions, they do not portray concrete scenes from the work and thus document them, but instead they depict more generic impressions of the places he visits, such as urban landscapes, vistas from or within metro trains, and some portraits. Therefore, the photographs tend to complement the text and create a general atmosphere that influences its reception but contribute little to its accuracy. On the contrary, this approach can cause epistemological tensions. The discrepancy between text and photo in the final scene at Europa point can illustrate this. As Pitts arrives at the Mediterranean coast, he describes the rainy weather and that he "could barely see a few meters in front of [him], never mind across the straits and into Africa" (380). However, the photograph printed on the next page shows a person, ostensibly Pitts himself, gazing towards the open sea under a clear sky. Though the photograph is not explicitly connected to the passage, their placement on the same double page implicitly establishes such link, and readers could mistakenly take it as a documentation of the described scene. Based on this example, one should therefore be wary of Pitts' use of photography as it tends to have an illustrative function which influences and mediates our reading but does not document his observations—even though this impression can be created.

Nevertheless, Pitts occasionally describes in his text when he takes photographs and how the people react to it. He usually does not ask for permission, and thereby makes them pose, but takes them in secret. We can infer these methods both by looking at the printed photographs, where most people do not seem to be aware of the camera lens, but also by reading his text since the practice often leads to confrontations. For example, when he is in Paris, Pitts describes that he is taking a photograph of an African market when a Senegalese woman confronts him: "No photo! No photo!' she shouted angrily, creating a bit of a scene." Pitts concedes his mistake and admits that it "was all fair game, . . . it is an incredibly rude thing to take a photograph of somebody without asking" (49).[23] Though he shows some sympathy, he does not refrain from the practice, as in Marseille he once again gets confronted: "I took some photographs and was spotted by an Algerian man who rushed out and followed me down the street." Only after Pitts shows his old BBC press pass does the man calm down and answers, "Aaah, BBC? I am sorry, I thinking you 'ave problem … maybe police?" (328). Unlike in his writing, with his photographs Pitts aims to be a more detached observer who records the environment without influencing it. Thus, a strong contrast emerges to Vollmann's more

[23] Her unwillingness to be photographed could once again have to do with her residence status, as Pitts' co-traveler remarks: "I bet that woman is here illegally – or probably doing something illegal" (49).

participative use of photography. However, it seems that Pitts is not always successful, and as he gets confronted, he once again becomes involved and can no longer hide behind the lens.

With *Afropean*, Pitts delivers a journalistic work that helped him, and possibly his readership, to discover the diverse African European community. Moreover, he made an argument for the usefulness of the label Afropean. The focus of assessment should therefore not be confined to epistemological subtleties, but instead we should evaluate his work's success based on more practical criteria, such as its capacities to educate and create awareness. Still, through various techniques, his work manages to tell his personal story without threatening its journalistic integrity. First and foremost, his self-reflectivity allows for a more critical appraisal of his own truth claims. Further, by invoking the concept of Afropean, Pitts employs a framework through which he integrates and naturalizes new experiences. Nonetheless, he remains sufficiently flexible to revise the concept in light of challenging encounters. And with a similar explicitness as Vollmann, Pitts discusses the various literary influences on his own writing and thus implicitly acknowledges its status as a symbolic construction of reality with its possibilities and limits. Then, by focusing on his embodied experience, Pitts qualifies his standpoint as particularly well suited for the topic he explores, as it gives him better access to marginalized groups and their subjectivity—although other environments remain impenetrable to him. Finally, I mentioned how Pitts recontextualizes and embeds encounters within the book's larger narrative structure and thereby invests them with symbolic meanings. This allows Pitts to utilize both a factual and narrative conception of truth, which complement each other and thus support his argument. Even though Eric Otieno Sumba contends that the non-academic form Pitts chose for his work "couldn't possibly have made a conceptual case for [Afropean]," in line with his activist agenda, the somewhat lighter travel reportage made it possible to reach a wider readership and popularize the term.[24]

[24] An indication for his success is the work's translation into several foreign languages and reissues. As of to date, *Afropean* has been translated into German, French, Spanish and Italian

5 Conclusion

In our times characterized by the advance of post-truth politics, it seems that many have lost faith in journalism as a democratic institution, or they prioritize their own political opinions over facts to form judgments. And while the demagogic urge to label all opposing views as "fake" might not be the most productive grounds to enter a conversation, I have argued that objective journalism can also be criticized from a more reflected, academic angle. With the rise of postmodernism, notions like objectivity and stable truths have been increasingly questioned, and instead feminism made the case that our unique standpoints influence how we can know the world. Additionally, objective journalism tends to reproduce the dominant social order and disengage readers from the political process. As a cultural form that challenges many of the deep-seated assumptions of the traditional newsroom, I proposed the genre of literary journalism because it allows for greater representational freedoms to address various epistemological shortcomings. The bulk of my thesis consisted of an analysis of Vollmann's *Riding* and Pitts' *Afropean*, which illustrated two alternative approaches that highlight some of the possibilities the genre can offer. Despite their different foci, central to both works is the narrators' self-conscious stance and disclosure of biases, whether they arise from their personal background, the larger cultural context, or the cultural forms they employ. While the engagement with the self indeed grants authors the license for more subjective reporting, I nevertheless deem it a more transparent and honest way of doing journalism that acknowledges a journalist's profound involvement in their writing.

One needs to admit that self-reflective texts are open to manipulation as well, since overt narrators can also mislead or lie. Further, whereas the factual accuracy of a classic newspaper article can and ought to be guaranteed by the institution, this is not necessarily the case for the more independent literary journalism. But apart from such structural freedoms, I would argue that manipulations are easier to locate since readers engage with a personified and thus overt narrator. For example, I argued that Vollmann creates around himself an ethos of absolute sincerity by revealing polarizing opinions or addressing his representational inadequacies. However, a critical reader can deconstruct his efforts as a conscious rhetorical strategy to increase his trust. Similarly, Pitts insists on his black working-class identity, which bestows him with an insider's authority to write about the themes he explores. At the same time, his insistence can raise suspicions and expose the invocation of his background as an authentication technique he purposefully employs. Although authors can deliberately strengthen their truth claims through various means, I suggest that such overt interferences can

more easily be detected since they are associated with a personalized narrator and thus not hidden behind a "view from nowhere." Finally, if we recall Roggenkamp, one can argue that texts encourage readers to take in a more critical perspective if they do not claim to print "fact and fact alone" (135).

While institutional pressures might increase an article's adherence to facts, the same institutions also limit the choice of topics and how they are presented, which can leave readers unengaged. Literary journalists, on the other hand, get the chance to delve into themes that are not considered news-worthy, describe events not only on a factual level, and thus set the agenda themselves. If Pitts had described a succession of isolated encounters, he could hardly have engaged readers in the same way. But by synthesizing them into a larger narrative about the Afropean culture, he establishes their relevance as a part of his argument and thereby shows to readers why they matter. The emphasis of Pitts' journalism is therefore not the mere dissemination of information, but instead, like an activist, he generates interest and understanding for an otherwise largely unexplored topic.[25] Similarly, despite the focus on philosophical rather than social questions, Vollmann's journey into the underbelly of American society is made relevant precisely because it constitutes his individualist and anti-authoritarian critique of the contemporary USA. In conclusion, we can say that because both Vollmann and Pitts are observers who are highly invested in their stories, they can argue for their relevance in ways objective journalists cannot.

Since many of the advantages of literary journalism are related to its editorial freedom, the strongest case for the genre is as a distinct cultural form that exists alongside traditional journalism. Nevertheless, both forms undeniably share some territory, and therefore I suggest that a selection of the discussed practices can indeed be expanded to and applied within the journalism coming from the newsroom. Especially when it comes to more immersive reportages, a heightened sensibility for the opportunities and limitations granted by one's standpoint proves useful. For example, journalists can immerse themselves in a different environment and try to acquire an insider's perspective. Or alternatively, for certain topics a news outlet can assign a journalist with a minority background and thereby make use of their advantageous perspective. But I also think that non-immersive reporting can benefit from self-reflection, as it allows for a greater understanding of how the very medium and form one is using influences the construction of reality. Vollmann's epistemological playfulness might be

[25] To bring in the "affective turn" (Felski 28): for me, *Afropean* truly achieved that goal, since the work sparked my interest in a culture previously unfamiliar to me, and I did more research on many of the mentioned figures.

disorienting at times—his work rather tests the limits—nonetheless, exhibiting an awareness of what truth claims one is making on what grounds can lead to a more critical and transparent journalism. I should clarify that some events lend themselves better to extensive standpoint analysis than others: if a journalist covers a governmental press release, I have little interest in their subjective perception of it. However, when it comes to other types of journalism, whether it is investigative reporting, reports from disaster sites or war zones, but also when doing portraits of people or longer feature articles, a journalist's inward attention can prove a valuable resource. And apparently, there seem to be some positive developments in that direction, as in recent years a growing number of publications and independent creators have begun with a more personal and immersive type of journalism that places greater emphasis on the journalist's involvement in their story.

Afropean might or might not be successful in changing the minds of xenophobic Europeans, and whether *Riding* can convince the average Norwegian of Vollmann's anti-authoritarian philosophy remains anyone's guess. Moreover, it is highly doubtful whether literary journalism can solve the Herculean task of appeasing societal skepticism and make people regain their trust in journalism. What they achieve is to withstand the more scholarly critiques that question notions of truth and objectivity on philosophical grounds, as through their self-conscious constructions of the world, the authors acknowledge the influence of their standpoint on their knowledge claims. Therefore, their works are not presented from a reified "view from nowhere," often seen in objective journalism, but the authors call attention to the extremely complex process that leads from initial observation to the finished story by exposing their motivations, biases, and direct involvement in their environment. In short—Vollmann and Pitts acknowledge their active role in creating their texts instead of offering them as a copy of reality.

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