

Brandon W. Bollom

April 26, 2002

**Undercover Literary Journalism
Under Violent Circumstances**

Undercover Literary Journalism Under Violent Circumstances

Introduction

The idea of a journalist completely abandoning his or her current status in order to research a story is not a particularly new technique. From the early days of journalism, writers such as Jack London and George Orwell have used “drop out journalism” to get a more in depth look at a certain group of people and how they function when they do not realize that anyone is watching them. Often, these people have to leave their friends and families behind to live for extended periods of time in places where the average person would not dare to (or care to) go. Usually, the situations have a chance of becoming dangerous.

Three major works in undercover journalism show different aspects of how well it can work, and also how it has the possibility of coming up short if not investigated properly. The pieces explain how their author gained access to the specific people and places being investigated, any changes that had to be made for them to fit in, and also how their friends and family felt about them leaving. One important aspect that is not always addressed in pieces of this type is how the journalist “dropped back in” to society after this extended stay elsewhere. When used properly, this technique can tell important information about what the journalist was thinking and how they felt about breaking any acquaintances they may have made during their stay.

Like all other types of literary journalism, undercover journalists must use basic techniques such as scene setting, status details, dialog, dialect and voice to tell the story of their experiences and those they encounter. They are also expected to use primary rules of journalism like keeping the story truthful and not making up dialog, even under harsh and violent circumstances where note taking is often the last thing on their mind. One important distinction between undercover and other types of literary journalism is the opportunity to “cross the line.” When situations turn violent or controversial (often illegal), even journalists who are supposed to observe are often tempted to break rules. Is this always a bad thing? In undercover journalism, it is often the only way they stay alive and keep their cover.

Harlem on My Mind

“Changing your clothes and your hairstyle isn’t always enough; sometimes you have to disguise your soul. (Kerrane 384)”

Lawrence Otis Graham was given the assignment of living for one month in ever dangerous Harlem by his *New York* magazine editors. He was to find an apartment there and live as a “poor black man,” along the way exploring the two unique cultures that coexist in the community. Graham planned to use connections of his friends and family living in the more affluent sections to tell the other part of the story that would become “Harlem on My Mind.”

Graham assumed this project to be a straightforward one, especially considering his similar experiences in previous undercover journalistic work. Just a year before this assignment was presented to him, he had taken a job in an all white Greenwich, Connecticut country club as a busboy to write the piece, “Invisible Man.” Unlike that piece, the double life Graham would be forced to live while researching for “Harlem on My Mind” would put him through incredible stress and involve him in perilous situations.

Access to Harlem was easy to gain for Graham. He had visited friends and family living in the nicer neighborhoods throughout his life. For this assignment, though, Graham decided not only to investigate the upscale parts of Harlem, but to rent a room and live in the more dangerous side. As an Ivy League educated lawyer, Graham was not used to being in these low-income areas for extended amounts of time, and it shows in his first attempts at renting.

Access

The landlord of the first building he visited was named only “Peaches.” After a brief introduction, she handed Graham a key and told him to go check out the second door on the left of the third floor.

I showed myself up two flights of rickety, linoleum-covered stairs that seemed to drop inches as my foot climbed to the next steeper step. I came to the second doorknob, inserted the key, and pushed open the heavy steel door.

It was the first time I had ever stared down the barrel of a gun.

“What the fuck you think you’re doing?” a voice asked from just behind the door.

I could smell the odor of human sweat mixed with natural gas. My eyes gazed with an

almost dreamlike dizziness. The frosty-gray gun was so sleek it looked like a child's toy. But when the man released the safety, I knew I'd better start talking.

"Sorry, wrong door. Please...sorry. Peaches gave...Sorry – wrong...Sorry...key. Please."

That's all I managed to say. As I pulled the door closed again, my eyes passed the image of a half-nude woman sitting at the edge of an unmade bed. She had something metal – a pen or a small pipe – in her mouth. I ran down the creaking stairs, still smelling the gaseous odor, and lunged out the front door, ahead of Peaches, who was oblivious to her mistake (Member 256).

This one frightening event was not the only mistake that would happen while Graham attempted to gain access. The other major errors were his fault and could not be blamed on someone like Peaches. Graham discovered immediately that his wardrobe would have to change.

The status details of Harlem were much different than he had predicted. Graham searched for a place to live, and thus his main source of access, dressed in white tennis shoes, a Ralph Lauren windbreaker and khaki pants. When he looked across the street while talking to Peaches, he saw a group of six young men dressed in proper Harlem attire. "Black baseball caps, dark pullover shirts, black leather and vinyl coats, and black or brown baggy pants. My very appearance was screaming 'suburban outsider,' and quickly attracting attention. (Member 257)"

Graham's biggest problem in this piece of undercover journalism is that he is not willing to go all the way to get his story. After the events at Peaches' complex, he finds himself wondering if this is the right place for him to be. "I thanked Peaches, glanced at her car, then ran back to 125th Street, realizing that if I was really going to move into Harlem, I'd better find a different wardrobe and a better address. (Member 257)" Though he did eventually find a place to live for this month of research, he is constantly disdainful of his surroundings and constantly writes anxiously, waiting for the time when he will be able to leave.

Literary Journalism Techniques

The most often used techniques in Graham's *Harlem on My Mind* are the ones that the reader would most likely expect going in. To portray the difference in what he is used to from

his world in upscale New York with what he finds in Harlem, Graham uses dialog, dialect, descriptions and status details.

Consistently throughout the descriptions of people and places he visits in Harlem, Graham will tell of the status of life there with details like “empty forty-ounce bottles of malt liquor strewn along the front stoops of the four-story walk-up.” He will, without fail, find the negative stereotype that everyone expects to find in Harlem and point it out to his readers. Drugs, guns, rats, roaches, Malcolm X caps, beepers, Bar-B-Q, Thunderbird, fake Gucci bags, Dr. Dre, diced watermelon and sweet-potato pie. Graham writes like he feels that everyone in Harlem is exactly the same, though his research does not go deep enough to discover why they cling to these symbols. He even manages to make himself look foolish and insult a hair stylist with this bias about the homogeneity of the Harlem community when he goes to get a haircut.

“I said give me a cut that will let me fit in with the Harlem scene,” I said. “I’m a writer and musician from out of town and I need a hip kind of look that’ll get me over.” We confronted each other in the large round mirror. With one hand holding a comb and the other hand on her hips, she launched into a tirade with her cornrows flying at her shoulder. “What do you mean make you look like everybody else?” she asked. “Ain’t nobody getting the same exact haircut.”

Crossing the Line

The most disturbing part of Graham’s piece *Harlem on my Mind* is that he never does cross any lines to try to get at the real story of these people. He lives with them for a month, mostly spending time in his apartment and telling the reader how bad it is there without really experiencing the everyday life of Harlem. Graham makes a few “friends” but mostly uses them to reinforce his preconceived stereotypes of the residents of poor Harlem.

Jojo becomes the stereotypical drug dealer, always wearing the “ghetto gear” and carrying a beeper and usually a weapon. Jojo even comes to trust Graham enough to offer him a job as one of his dealers when Graham complains of his inability to find a job. He chooses not to cross that line and investigate what lies on the other side, excusing himself by telling Jojo that he needs a “day job.”

Willie is the older black man, never doing his job as superintendent unless the building owner is around. He is always drinking and talking to his friends on the front stoop of the building, and does not hesitate to ask for money almost every time Graham talks to him. Graham makes the assumption that he might as well give Willie money freely because he has keys to every apartment and will take whatever he wants anyway. These types of assumptions, while possibly true, only reinforce the stereotypes that in the beginning, the readers are supposed to believe Graham is trying to destroy.

He also tells stories of being walked in on in his own apartment, where he consistently stays, by people looking for former tenants who owe them money. Also, while in his apartment, Graham is constantly hearing gunshots and witnesses two actual shootings right outside his window. These frightful experiences lead Graham to the one point where he seems to cross the line, but it is never fully realized in the piece. He decides to buy a gun.

The plan was simple. I was to drive to a phone booth on 125th Street off of the West Side Highway. Neither one of us would ever touch the gun during the transaction. He would hand me a steel-belted radial for my Toyota. The gun would be wrapped in cloth inside the tire.

...

I looked around us at the darkened bar and thought this was all a little complicated and ridiculous. I liked the fact that I didn't have to go to his apartment, but this still seemed complicated, just to get a gun in Harlem.

"Is all this really necessary?" I asked the old man. "Can't I just give you the sixty dollars and you give me the gun?"

"Carl" took another sip from his glass. I immediately got the feeling I had said the wrong thing. He was clearly from the old school. Aggressive enough to deal in firearms, but old enough to be self-righteous and paternalistic about it.

"Look," he said with a wrinkled brow. "You and your white boys come in here from your Jersey suburbs to buy stuff all the time. Well, if you're gonna come here, then you're gonna buy it *our way*."

At first, I thought I didn't hear him correctly. Here I was, a black man, dressed like a Harlemiter, and he's comparing me to some white boy from suburban New Jersey?

Even after all that he has been through to this point, Graham does not realize that he is not passing for a "Harlemiter." He tries to do one thing that could add interest to his story, and ends up getting put back in his place. He never again mentions if he buys the gun from "Carl."

Dropping Back In

Graham does not explain how he makes his return to his normal life. This is yet another important part of the story that has not been addressed. In most cases of undercover journalism, the decision of when to “drop back in” to their normal part of society and how it is accomplished is integral to completing the journey. For Graham though, it seems like he never really dropped out, so the return was most likely just a matter of him packing up his possessions and driving away. No real friendships were made, no connections that he had to break away from. These factors most likely led Graham to the decision not to include his return. Recounting his return would have only told the readers in, yet another way, how little his trip to Harlem uncovered.

Memos from Purgatory

In Harlan Ellison’s most ambitious attempt at literary journalism, he spent two months running with a kid street gang in the Red Hook district of Brooklyn for research on a novel he wanted to write. Borrowing from Hemingway’s idea that “A man should never write what he doesn’t know,” Ellison set aside his conventional lifestyle, donned the “easily identifiable status symbols (the hair d.a., the black jacket, the boots, the insolent curl to the lips)” (Ellison 31) and set out to research juvenile delinquency. Though he did write the novel *Web of the City*, using these experiences, he was not pleased with the results. Ellison later decided to revisit his experiences with the gang and write a non-fiction account titled *Memos from Purgatory*.

Access

A theme running through Ellison’s literary journalism is his technique of leading off stories with how he achieves access to the situation. In this instance, he chooses not to show up one of the gang members, but instead to fit in with them. Luckily for Ellison, he made the right moves and decisions. They accepted him almost immediately, and for the rest of the story, he would be known as “Cheech Beldone.” But he was not yet a Baron.

Literary Journalism Techniques

The most commonly used literary journalism devices utilized by Ellison for this piece

were rich descriptions, dialog and voice. Throughout his work, these become his trademark techniques, used often when he is writing for any journalistic medium.

The initiation scene is one of the most fully realized parts of *Memos from Purgatory*. Ellison spends an extraordinary amount of time painting the picture of what he is seeing, hearing, smelling all around while they prepare to accept him into their ranks. “The room was tastelessly furnished in Period Squalor. Great spring-thrusting Morris chairs, a down-at-the-legs sofa without cushions, a sling chair that had been slung once too often. Packing crates and old orange cartons did yeoman duty where chairs and tables could not be found. (Ellison 46)” This type of description continues for pages as he describes the setting for the upcoming ritual.

The oath to the Barons is laid out in extended dialog, using another common technique of Ellison’s: the multiple voice. He is both Cheech Beldone taking the oath and Harlan Ellison the author of this story, describing how he felt then as well as how he reacts to those feelings now.

Crossing the Line

With this being a very dangerous situation, Ellison found that he was forced to cross several lines that he had not expected. His ideas of right and wrong would be questioned, as he had to choose between continuing with this story by living the life of a gang member and stepping back into his normal life, losing everything that he had accomplished to that point.

Immediately after completing his oath to the Barons, he had to survive the initiation. The first obstacle is overcome using brains instead of brawn, a recurring theme in Ellison’s work. The second portion of the initiation became a bit more complicated. Ellison was to choose one of the “Debs” – girls that hung out with the Barons – and take her into a private room for a brief sexual encounter. This became a difficult decision because he had to pick a girl who was not already taken by another Baron or considered “shared property.” He selected a delicate, high class Deb named Feline, whom most in the gang had passed over because they believed her to be a virgin. If Ellison went through with this, he would be committing statutory rape since he was 21 years old and she was only sixteen. He does not say straight out what

happened in that room, but from the details he gives, Ellison made the decision to live the part of Cheech Beldone fully that night.

How do you equate morality, ethics, good or bad – in a pitch-black basement room with nothing but a bed and a pretty girl?

Sometimes the right things get done for the wrong reasons, and sometimes the wrong things get done for the right reasons.

I had a feeling she wouldn't be alone when she cried, later. (Ellison 57)

After that night, two out of the three initiation rights had been cleared. The only thing Ellison had left to do was participate in a rumble to become a full-fledged Baron.

The chapters after Ellison's initiation into the gang are dedicated to explaining life on the streets and how the gangs interact with each other and amongst themselves. It is not until Ellison finally gets involved in a rumble that things kick into high gear. In depth detail, scene by scene construction and dialog are all used to explain every moment of this intense battle. This "Comanche style" fight was between Ellison and "Candle" of a rival gang. Comanche style involves tying one hand behind each participant's back while each clench opposite ends of a handkerchief between their teeth and fight with knives held in their free hand. Page upon page of stress filled seconds are portrayed in violent detail as the two men go through this dance of death. In the end, it is Ellison who prevails.

He went back down, bits of him all over the place. But he wasn't finished. He tried it again, and this time I took him under the chin with the toe of my boot. His eyes rolled up in his head and he gagged and puked and fell right back over, the knife still clenched in his fist. (Ellison 81)

As powerful as the account of this fight is, the huge gang versus gang rumble finale of the book was still to come. Ellison spends a few chapters describing the events that lead up to the big showdown, trying to explain why these kids would put their lives on the line for the sole reason of protecting their turf.

When they arrive at the designated spot for the war, Ellison again breaks out of the thoughts of the past and reminds the readers that he is a reporter under these violent circumstances only to gather the story. After that last bit of Ellison the author, he becomes one of them. "I wanted to kill, too! Like sharks smelling blood. Go! (Ellison 108)"

Dropping Back In

After having gone this far to meet these people, experience these violent events and gather all of the information he would need for his novel, and later, *Memos*. He only had one chance to get out of the Barons and back into his normal life, and he took it.

During the heat of battle, Ellison lands in the bushes; beaten, bloodied and passing in and out of consciousness. He wanted to get back up, but his busted body would not allow it until sirens and screams alerted him that police were on the way to bust the gang members. This became Ellison's only way out of the gang lifestyle. He had to leave then and there after eight weeks of living with these people and never look back.

I changed clothes after showering, and rolled up the apparel that had belonged to Cheech Beldone. As far as I was concerned, he had been killed back there in Prospect Park. I cleaned out every little thing in the room that might lead anyone back to me. I packed it all in a paper bag and left the room and the neighborhood. I caught the subway uptown, and changed at Times Square.

...

Then I fell down on the bed and slept.

When I woke, after hours of terrible dreams and restless tossing, I was not purged, but Cheech Beldone was gone. I was Harlan Ellison again, and I was out of Brooklyn, and off the streets. I did not know what had happened to Pooch, or Feline, or Fish or Fence or any of them. All I knew was that I was safe, and hadn't been hurt, and would never, never go back. (Ellison 113)

The intensity of events surrounding his return to society, and his emotional connection to the friends that he had made, cause this to become an important addition to his story. This unique perspective of Ellison looking back at the things he had been through sheds even more light on how rough his journey had been, as well as how hard it must be for those who cannot take this path to escape. It is a fitting conclusion to this in depth piece of undercover journalism.

Newjack

If joining a street gang was not dangerous enough, Ted Conover tackles undercover journalism from the opposite side of the law in his book *Newjack*. With most coverage of corrections officers in the media portraying them as one-dimensional characters with no redeeming qualities, mindlessly authoritarian and sadistic, Conover wanted to write a more realistic story about them. (Riley 1) When he started his research and attempted to gain access to interview New York corrections officers, he was denied official permission at every prison. Conover was determined to uncover exactly what went on in these prisons and what kind of mindset it takes to work with the most violent members of our society. He decided that if they would not let him conduct interviews, his only other option would be to become an officer himself. “I was here, basically, because the Department had told me I couldn’t be. The Academy, they said, was off-limits to journalist – no exceptions, end of conversation. Now, why should that be? I wondered. (Conover 17)”

Access

Gaining access to this world would prove to be more difficult than just applying for a normal job. Conover had to put in an application to take a correction-officer exam, and then wait several months for his scheduled exam time. After that, he waited several more months before he would be asked back for training.

When he received his acceptance letter, he had only two weeks to drop his job at *The New York Times Magazine* and report to the training academy. Taking this position would mean seven weeks away from home and much more if he decided to continue after the academy into an actual prison job. Conover quickly wrapped up his work with the magazine and reported for training.

While in training, he would learn much about what it takes to survive and excel as a corrections officer, but most importantly to him, he would gain total access to an actual prison. Though the training would prove to be rough, physical and emotionally exhausting, Conover learned that all of these skills would be needed when he became the lone man in charge of large

groups of prisoners.

One problem that he had to overcome was how he would be able to take notes while on the job. Conover used his Sing Sing issued notepad, rarely used by most officers, to take down immense amounts of dialog and detail notes. Then when he would return home at the end of a shift, he would transcribe his notes for an hour or more while settling back into his “real skin” (Conover 243).

Literary Journalism Techniques

Conover uses most techniques of literary journalism at some point in *Newjack*. The most obvious and often used ones are scene construction, dialog and dialect of inmates and detailed descriptions of the prison system. Status details are used also, but since the prisoners are not allowed many personal possessions, they become less detailed than the events that happen.

Once Conover gets past the access issues and into the meat of this story, his construction becomes very straight forward. Scene by scene, the events unfold, beginning with his first day on the job and working through steadily until he leaves the position at the end of *Newjack*. The scenes he constructs are richly detailed, containing all of the violence and hatred that is expected, but also many intimate moments that are not normally depicted when talking about prison life.

The most disturbing and violent situation occurs at the chiming in of the new year while Conover is on duty. As the countdown to midnight draws near, many prisoners begin lighting any flammable object in their cell on fire. They create large bonfires in the corridors between cells and with them being trapped inside, the fires and smoke become very dangerous. Being that it is the middle of the night on a holiday, the staff is shorthanded and had to fight fires, deal with alarms and stop inmates from creating new infernos that could possibly burn the entire complex, prisoners and all, to the ground.

These types of violent actions were common in Sing Sing, and Conover made sure to describe them all in as much detail as possible. One inmate who had been harassing him

throughout the day made the mistake of leaving a mirror up between the bars of his cell door to watch people coming and going. This was an infraction of the rules and Conover was determined to teach him a lesson by taking it away.

Quietly this time, I walked up and took it. He was furious. “You better watch out when you come back by, CO,” he threatened, adding something that I couldn’t understand but that I presumed to be about shitting me down. That was an angry keeplock’s trump card.

In my eagerness to get the mirror, I’d placed myself on the wrong side of his cell. To get back to my office, I’d have to pass by again.

...
I collected myself and walked down the gallery as I normally would have. I probably should have sprinted past the cell, but I didn’t want to betray any fear. As I drew even with P-49, it all happened very fast: a gob of spit flew past my nose, with my cheek catching some spray, and then the keeplock’s arm swung out at full length, his fist catching my head just behind the ear. I stumbled forward and then looked back. Cespedes and the fence guy had both seen the incident. The fence guy’s mouth was wide open. (Conover 123)

Overall, Conover was able to leave his job after one year without any major injuries, but that is not always the case. In addition to his own stories, Conover tells tales of other officers who came before as well as his contemporaries at Sing Sing who were not so lucky. Each story adds to the overall sense of dread, fear and violence that permeates the very walls of America’s prison system.

Crossing the Line

The entire book that Conover writes about this topic consists of him crossing the line. There is not one chapter that lacks a scene in which Conover is forced to make a choice of how to react to often violent situations. His decisions throughout could lead to bodily harm or even death if he does not make the right moves, or if the inmates do not respect his authority.

Often, he is approached to do favors for prisoners, which in the beginning he flat out refuses to do. As he learns more about the way this system works, he begins to become more flexible when a favor is appropriate, and could possibly result in useful information about more problematic prisoners. In one instance, he helps a prisoner get his watch back after he gets out of solitary confinement, only to be rewarded a few days later by that same prisoner “anony-

mously” turning in another prisoner that had been starting fights. There is one line that he obviously could not cross.

“Conover,” he said excitedly, waving to me.

“Yeah?”

“Come over here.”

...

I did.

He asked, “Anyone else out there?”

“Where?”

“On the gallery!”

...

“Why?” I demanded. I could not imagine these questions as anything but a prelude to violence – not only did he plan to strike me or throw something but he also wanted me to help him make sure there would be no witnesses. He looked very excited.

“Conover,” he whispered. “You know I go both ways?”

“What?”

“Shhh! I go both ways!”

“Yeah, okay, so you go both ways,” I said quietly.

“Come in here!”

“What? Why?”

He was frustrated that I still didn’t get it. “I want to blow you!” He opened his mouth and pointed at my crotch. I was surprised – first, that he would declare his desires, and second, that he would believe that there was any chance in the world that I would take him up on it, even if I were gay.

“Sorry, not my thing.”

“Come on! Nobody will see!”

“I’m the wrong guy!” I said. “Not into it!” I started walking away. But again he summoned me, in a loud whisper.

...

“Conover, don’t tell anyone, okay?”

It was just as Janice had said.

“Okay, man. Don’t worry. I won’t.”

After that, he never looked at me again. (Conover 265)

Though Conover states that consensual sex is quite common in the prison, this is one line he was not going to cross. He even tells of some transsexual inmates who become much like girlfriends to the more powerful prisoners, cuddling openly in the yard, when other homosexual activity on public display would be ridiculed or worse. One statement that he makes that has stirred up a bit of controversy about this book is that prison rape is much rarer than is depicted in the media, and even consensual sex between female officers and prisoners is more

commonplace. The most often used argument about these situations is that it could be difficult determining what is truly “consensual” in a prison setting, and what is just tolerated rape.

An important line that Conover does cross, even though he believed that “being a visitor to the world of corrections (Conover 243)” would keep him distanced from it would dramatically change his home life. The inability to leave stress at work becomes a hindrance to normal life at home. When dealing with his son’s incorrigibility one evening, Conover crossed the line.

Something in me sort of snapped. All day long I was disrespected by criminals; I felt that home should be different. I ran up the stairs and picked him up by his pajama tops outside her door.

“When I say no, you will listen!” I whispered angrily, giving him a spank, surprising myself.

I had never done that before, and it surprised him, too. He burst into tears. This woke his sister. I was furious, and I ordered her to go back to sleep. She didn’t obey either. The house filled with sobs.

“Into your room,” I ordered my son, and carried him bodily when he “refused to comply.”

A use-of-force on my own son, I realized the moment after it happened. There were better ways to handle the situation, I knew, but none that I seemed capable of at the time. I asked him to lie down with me in his bed so I could read him another book, and eventually he did. Then he held on to my arm, kind of tight. I felt like crying into his shirt, breaking down, sobbing for a good hour. I turned my head and read the story. (Conover 244)

The job of a corrections officer, working in a prison every day was very traumatic for Conover. He related coming home each night to a friend of his who worked at a gas station. No matter how much they washed, you could still smell gasoline on them when they got home. Working at a prison was the same way. “Prison got into your skin, or under it. If you stayed long enough, some of it probably seeped into your soul. (Conover 243). It even began to put stress on his marriage.

Margot had agreed to my project almost as blindly as I had pursued it. Generously and supportively, she adjusted her schedule and cut back on other commitments to accommodate mine. We have a strong marriage that thrives on our mutual curiosity about the world. Even so, the strains grew. Our social life suffered, sometimes because of my schedule, sometimes because mentally I just couldn’t handle certain kinds of Manhattan parties or dinner dates after a day of work in the prison.

...

I didn’t want to hear about the minutiae of her day. There wasn’t room in my brain for

what seemed trivialities. Black moods would come from out of nowhere and envelop me. I tried to hide them by acting civil, but “civil” came off as chilly and robotic. (Conover 246)

Lines have to be crossed when setting out on a project of this nature. Fortunately for Conover, the lines he crossed only cost him temporarily, and when he was able to leave, a normal family life was still waiting for him at home. It is easy to see how working in a prison has been labeled as one of the most high stress jobs in the world, and how so many relationships end in divorce when one person works there.

Dropping Back In

Determined to spend only one year working at Sing Sing, Conover finally reached his final day at the end of *Newjack*. His exit from this undercover life emphasized the attitude of corrections officers working in these high-stress jobs. He got stuck with overtime on his last shift, and as the officer finally came to relieve him, he had no sympathy for what they were to endure, much like no other officer ever had sympathy for him.

“How’s your day been so far?” I asked him.

“Not so good,” he answered.

“Well, it’ll get worse,” I assured him.

...

“Where’s the end gate?” the officer asked.

“Your immediate problem,” I answered, “is that all the cells are still on deadlock. You’ve got to get them off right away, while the gallery’s still clear and you have some elbow room.”

“Hey thanks man.”

Thanks, sure, I thought sardonically. Unlocking all the cells was a five- to ten-minute procedure, and within a couple of minutes, returning inmates from R-and-W would be clogging the north-end stairs, creating a huge traffic jam for inmates headed higher as they waited at the gates. I could have been a great guy and stuck around to help with the impending chaos. But my head was about to split open.

Fuck it, I thought. And in the true, not-my-problem spirit of Sing Sing, I fled. (Conover 302)

He does not get into the details of how he fit himself back into society and family life, but after all that he has written about his returns home, it is understood that this would not be an easy process.

Conclusions

Though these are not, by far, the only examples of undercover literary journalism available, they show an interesting range of the types of information that can be gathered depending on how deep the journalist wants to delve into their subject matter. They can exit the scene mentally and physically unscathed, much like Graham did from Harlem. But in cases like that, was there really any additional information gathered by being undercover? Should they cross the line as Ellison did in *Red Hook*, or is breaking many laws and moral codes going too far for a story? Should they spend so much time in their undercover investigation that it drastically affects their daily life as with Conover in *Sing Sing*? These are all relevant questions, and in their own way each journalist felt they were doing the right thing in their given situation.

Harlem on My Mind would have been more worthwhile had Graham left his apartment to explore and meet people during his time there. *Memos from Purgatory* would likely have been just as relevant had Ellison not committed statutory rape. *Newjack* would have been as telling, had Conover not lost himself in his job for such a long period of time. These journalists can only write what they discovered, and though different techniques were chosen to uncover the facts, they did what they felt necessary to help them survive and get the best story possible.

It takes a lot of courage to leave a comfortable life for the sole purpose of living in violent surroundings, hoping to tell a meaningful story. Though many critics would argue that one or more of these people went about making their discoveries in unnecessary ways, the fact is that they are putting their lives on the line to expose situations that most people would rather not realize even exist in this world. Journalists will continue to go undercover for as long as there remain stories with limited access to tell. Whenever someone refuses to sit for an interview, some journalist will find a way to get the information they need. How willing they are to risk harm will determine the ultimate success or failure of their endeavors.

Works Cited:

Conover, Ted. *Newjack*. New York, NY: Random House, 2000.

Ellison, Harlan. *Memos From Purgatory*. Evanston, Ill.: Regency Books, 1961.

Graham, Lawrence Otis. *Member of the Club*. New York, NY: HarperCollins, 1995.

Kerrane, Kevin and Ben Yagoda. *The Art of Fact*. New York, NY: Touchstone, 1997.

Riley, John. Review: *Newjack*. www.uaa.alaska.edu/just/forum/f173fa00/c_newjack.html.
April 15, 2002.