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Evaluating the effects of epistemic location in advocatory literary journalism

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Abstract
This article applies Lorraine Code's concept of 'epistemic location' to the practice of literary journalism, a form of narrative non-fiction or reportage. It argues that the location of the practitioner in regard to the subject and story places particular epistemic and ethical constraints on the modes of representation available to the writer. Two book-length works of literary journalism are analysed for the epistemic location of the practitioners outside the text, compared with rhetorical impact of narration within the text. The discussion concludes that choices made regarding the mode of representation can be detrimental to the author's purpose for the narrative, and that disclosure transparency is important – but not vital – epistemic defence for literary journalism.

Keywords
Epistemic location, knowledge-claims, literary journalism, objectivity, transparency

Introduction

On 6 April 2000, the editor of *The Atlantic Monthly*, Robert Vare, addressed scholars, writers and students at the Lukas Prize Project Conference. He stated that 'if the 1980s defined a streamlined razzle-dazzle newspaper era of USA Today-style news bites and factoids and charts and graphs … the hallmark of the last decade has been a growing fascination with long-form storytelling' (Vare, 2000). In the decade since, a new generation of writers has taken up the mantle of long-form literary journalism. This style of journalism can be characterised by a number of features which may include writers' long immersive periods with their subjects, adoption of a subject's point of view, use of personal voice, narrative arc, dialogue in full, scene reconstruction and fine writing

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(cf. Connery, 1992; Lounsberry, 1990; Sims, 1984). As an alternative form of news media, it 'privileges a journalism that is closely wedded to notion of social responsibility', at times 'replacing an ideology of "objectivity" with overt advocacy and oppositional practices' (Atton, 2003: 267). Literary journalism scholar John Hartsock (2000) also notes that 'not infrequently, narrative literary journalists [have been] associated with Populist and Progressive political causes, or at least [have] found themselves politicized by the subjectivities they examined' (pp. 42–43). Given that literary journalism is often not driven by the 'ideology of objectivity', practitioners working outside mainstream journalistic traditions may experience tension between reporting truthfully and employing narrative techniques usually associated with literary fiction (Harbers and Broersma, 2014: 2). The range of choice in narrative techniques available to the literary journalist also creates a potential proliferation of meaning and truth claims. Epistemic and ethical issues therefore need to be carefully balanced with narrative techniques that attempt to draw the reader into the world of the subject. This article explores how various modes of representation produce different types of knowledge- and truth-claims in two book-length works of literary journalism. It is argued that symbolic action of texts can be overshadowed when the writer's epistemic location is unclear or undefined; therefore, practitioners need to be aware of conditions uniquely imposed on their narrative by the research process – or their own social action – to produce epistemically defensible modes of representation.

Epistemic location and the ecological subject

Developments in the epistemological strand of philosophy are comparable to the development of literary journalism. Both arose from what can be characterised as 'tension between objectivist and postmodern knowledge claims' (Forde, 2008: 85), or a rejection that reality can solely be known through conventional and empirically verifiable means. Epistemologist Lorraine Code (2006) argues that the epistemologies of modernity 'defined themselves around ideals of pure objectivity and value-neutrality', ideals that 'are best suited to govern evaluations of the knowledge of knowers who can be considered capable of achieving a "view from nowhere" that allows them, through the autonomous exercise of their reason, to transcend particularity and contingency' (p. 24). This argument echoes Jack Fuller's (1997) concerns over the objectivity standard in journalism:

> In its purest usage, [objectivity] suggested that journalism meant to be so utterly disinterested as to be transparent. The report was to be virtually the thing itself, unrefracted by the mind of the reporter. This, of course, involved a hopelessly naïve notion from the beginning. And surely every reporter who has ever laid his fingers on the typewriter has known it. (p. 14)

While Kovach and Rosenstiel (2001) argue for objectivity to be understood as a method of replicating reporting processes rather than a transparent, bias-free subject position (pp. 72, 81, 95), Fuller's point is well made that the rhetorical effect produced by the objectivity standard masks the subject position of the reporter. Code (1995) similarly challenges the possibility of a 'view from nowhere'. She argues that traditional methods of verifying truth claims privilege those already in positions of hegemony. But she extends the

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argument by recognising that epistemic agents – or knowers – are 'ecological subjects' in that they exist in time, place, culture, and have interests born of their specific situation – such as gender, moral and political bias. Therefore, a critical evaluation of inquiry should be informed by 'values, background assumptions, and specificities of situation and place' (Code, 2006: 177). Code (1995) identifies key questions that she believes to be 'integral to analyses of the production and justification of knowledge claims' (p. 106). These include asking what type of epistemic agent the knowledge belongs to; where the knower is located physically, socially and politically in respect to their subject; and, finally, what the reasons are behind the knower's interest in their subject (Code, 1995: 105–106). These elements all contribute to an agent's 'epistemic location'.

An assessment of epistemic location arguably warrants investigation in all forms of journalism. As Lehman (2001) observes, 'Any literary text, whether fiction or nonfiction, even one's own memory of events, is arbitrated or "crafted" in important ways, rendering impossible the simple equation of "actuality" with nonfiction' (p. 335). However, given that the epistemic location of mainstream journalists is defined at least in part by institutional demands, the relative autonomy of literary journalists initially presents a better opportunity to analyse the impact of epistemic location and subjectivity on knowledge claims. Furthermore, literary journalism brings into sharp focus the crafted nature of narrative that is often obscured in mainstream journalism, providing a rich field in which to explore the relationship between epistemic location, knowledge claims and forms of representation.

The two texts analysed in this article both conform to widely accepted features of literary journalism including documented subject matter, immersive reporting, scene-by-scene reconstruction, dialogue in full, individual voice and fine detail (cf. Lounsberry, 1990; Sims, 1984; Wolfe, 1973). Both were debut book-length works researched and written over a 10-year period; they have also achieved enormous critical and popular success. Adrian Nicole LeBlanc's *Random Family: Love, Drugs, Trouble, and Coming of Age in the Bronx* (2004) follows the lives of four Puerto Rican youths, Jessica and Boy George, Cesar and Coco, growing up in New York. The book was conceived in the late 1980s while LeBlanc was reporting for *The Village Voice* on Boy George's rise and fall as a heroin dealer. Fascinated by the extraordinary success of the 'Kid Kingpin' and the women in his life, LeBlanc immersed herself in a poverty-stricken sub-culture for the next decade to try to understand the subjective experience of individuals behind the statistics. *Random Family* was named one of the 10 best books of the year by *The New York Times Book Review*, was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award and won the Anisfield-Wolf Book Award for nonfiction in 2004.

As late as December 2011, 64 weeks after its publication, Rebecca Skloot's *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* still held second place on the prestigious *New York Times* Best Seller list – an impressive achievement for a debut work of science writing. *The Immortal Life* is Skloot's narrative of an African-American woman who unknowingly produced the world's first 'immortal' cell line, that is, human cells that reproduce infinitely. The book follows three narrative strands: the life and death of Henrietta Lacks; the appropriation of her cells and subsequent rise of the lucrative biogenetic industry; and the story of Henrietta's family, but specifically her daughter, Deborah.

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The contrasting modes of representation in these two texts invite investigation into the form knowledge claims can take, and illuminate some interesting issues regarding epistemic location and representation. The following analyses explore the knowledge claims made in the narratives by exploring the key questions: What is the epistemic location of the knower in respect to their subject? What are the knowledge claims in these advocatory works of literary journalism? How are these knowledge claims affected by choices in representation? To what degree are the knowledge claims made epistemically defensible? And, finally, how might the concept of 'epistemic location' inform the practice of future literary journalists?

Assessing epistemic location

The two practitioners in this analysis take quite different approaches to disclosing epistemic location in their texts. The paratext of *The Immortal Life* is extensive, and signals a strong commitment to disclosure transparency. The narrative is framed with a 2-page author's note stating 'This is a work of nonfiction. No names have been changed, no characters invented, no events fabricated' (Skloot, 2010: ix). Skloot goes on to clarify her practice and rationale for quoting dialogue, diary entries, recreating scenes and using sources. The author's note also prefigures the narrative's thematic concerns, citing issues such as science, ethics, race and class. Following the narrative are 43 pages of peritext that act as epistemic defence, including afterword, acknowledgements, and an extensive set of notes that deepen the verifiability of Skloot's research. But of this extensive network of disclosure transparency measures, perhaps the most revealing in terms of epistemic location is the Prologue: The Woman in the Photograph. In these 7 pages, Skloot (2010) foregrounds differences between herself and her subjects:

> I grew up white and agnostic in the Pacific Northwest, my roots half New York Jew and half Midwestern Protestant; Deborah was a deeply religious black Christian from the South … She grew up in a black neighborhood that was one of the poorest and most dangerous in the country; I grew up in a safe, quiet middle-class neighborhood in a predominantly white city and went to high school with a total of two black students. I was a science journalist who referred to all things supernatural as 'woo-woo stuff'; Deborah believed Henrietta's spirit lived on in her cells, controlling the life of anyone who crossed its path. Including me. (p. 7)

Differences in race, class, belief and access to education and health care are reinforced throughout the narrative as Skloot repeatedly draws attention to her subjects' plight. The section above also foregrounds the divergence in epistemic foundations for the subject and the writer: Skloot's reality is shaped by observable, testable phenomena, while Deborah derives meaning from spiritual and metaphysical experience.

In sharp contrast to Skloot's 50+ pages explicitly disclosing her epistemic location (reinforced repeatedly throughout the narrative), Adrian Nicole LeBlanc offers a short author's note followed by an acknowledgements page at the end of her 404-page narrative. In it, LeBlanc (2004) also signals her commitment to verifiability:

> I was present for much of what happened here; some scenes were recounted to me. Hundreds of hours of written and tape-recorded interviews were supplemented with other research,

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> including court transcripts; medical, academic, financial, legal, police, and prison records; and personal letters and diaries. (p. 405)

LeBlanc (2004) further writes that when a subject 'is said to have "thought" or "believed" something, those thoughts and beliefs were described and recounted to [her] by that person' (p. 405). While Skloot explicitly draws attention to differences between herself and her subjects, readers of *Random Family* may draw their conclusions about race from the photo of the author on the dust jacket; the Acknowledgements section also implicitly suggests the disparity in access to education and financial support. Readers may infer from the Acknowledgements that the relationship between LeBlanc and her subjects is a warm one, but would need to go further afield to find out that she lived with her subjects intermittently, 'shuttling children to welfare appointments' and becoming a part of the increasingly random family (Farley, 2003).

A deeper analysis of epistemic location calls for an assessment of effect. For Code (1995), the question 'Who cares?' is a central concern. It is epistemological in the sense that a position of caring

> operates from a presumed … *knowledge* that the situations in question are appropriate sites for the practice of care; that their participants … need or want this kind of care; and that the presumptive carer(s) know(s) them well enough to provide the care they require.

Furthermore, the question 'calls upon self-proclaimed carers to elaborate the epistemic qualifications – how they have informed themselves, what their interests are – that entitle them to intervene in these people's lives, here and now' (p. 106).

Again, Skloot's disclosure is comprehensive. In the Prologue of *The Immortal Life* she provides a rationale for her interest in the Lacks family, which began in a Biology class when she was 16 years old. The discovery that Henrietta Lacks was all but unknown in the world of science prompted initial research into Lacks' history. Within the narrative, Skloot establishes her 'position of caring' and attempts to reinforce that her interventions are appropriate through her subject's voice. Skloot quotes Deborah verbatim when she writes,

> There's two sides to the story, and that's what we want to bring out. Nothing about my mother is truth if it's about wantin to fry the researchers. It's not about punish [sic] the doctors or slander the hospital. I don't want that. (p. 250)

and '"It's too late for Henrietta's children," she told me one day over the phone. "This story ain't about us anymore. It's about the new Lacks children"' (p. 302). That Deborah is quoted as perceiving herself and her role in the context of a narrative adds an authenticating layer to Skloot's project. The reader is reminded that the story is unfinished, but there is also an indication that it is a work of advocacy ('It's about the new Lacks children').

LeBlanc's (2004) intention for *Random Family* is implicitly signalled from the outset with an epigraph taken from William Blake:

> Some say that Happiness is not Good for mortals & they ought to be answerd that Sorrow is not fit for Immortals & is utterly useless to any one a blight never does good to a tree & if a blight

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> kill not a tree but it still bear fruit let none say that the fruit was in consequence of the blight. (p. vii)

This frame signals LeBlanc's advocatory role for those who experience class injustice. In an interview recorded in *The New New Journalism* (Boynton, 2005), LeBlanc explains,

> What interested me was less the details of the drug business, but what it *felt like* to be a young Puerto Rican kid from the Bronx who was able to fly to Hawaii with his girlfriend at the drop of a hat. (Boynton, 2005: 236, emphasis in original)

Her desire was not only to know, but also to convey experiential reality from the perspective of the subject.

Epistemic location and narrative representation

Literary journalism scholar and LeBlanc's mentor, Mark Kramer (1995) states that the point of immersion is to 'comprehend subjects at a level Henry James termed "felt life" – the frank, unidealized level that includes individual difference, frailty, tenderness, nastiness, vanity, generosity, pomposity, humility, all in proper proportion' (n.p.). To emphasise these aspects of her subjects' experience, LeBlanc writes in a third-person narrative mode – or what might be called 'aestheticized objective narration' (Frus, 1994: 92) – prompting reviewers to observe that *Random Family* reads 'like a novel' (Horst, 2009). This is unsettling for some readers and critics, given that LeBlanc intermittently lived with her subjects and clearly had a close relationship with a number of her subjects. The author's note suggests LeBlanc had extensive access to her subjects, but, as is characteristic of literary journalism, the types of knowledge- and truth-claims produced throughout the narrative are unverifiable by empirical means. Thus, a key question raised by the third-person narrative mode is, 'Whose knowledge is this?' This question is of primary analytic importance, according to Code (1995). When working with a concept of knowledge as a construct produced by 'cognitive agents within diverse social practices and positions of differing power and privilege, epistemological pretentions to disinterested objectivity have to be re-examined and deconstructed' (pp. 105–6). The narrative mode in *Random Family* raises questions about the possibility of representing the truth of others' experience, particularly given the disparity of race, class and education between author and subjects.

Unlike LeBlanc, Skloot uses her own research journey as a through-line to hold the narrative together. It is 'the story behind the story' and has both authenticating and validating functions. The narrative is bookended by a section entitled 'Deborah's Voice' and – in the final chapter – Skloot's reaction to Deborah's death in 2009, shortly before the book was published. Her relationship with Deborah is consequently central to the narrative: Will Deborah open up to Rebecca? How will it happen? Can one reporter help repair years of damage by intrusive and unfeeling media? Significantly, Skloot resisted writing herself into early drafts of the narrative in order to highlight her subjects' experience (Pitzer, 2010). As discussed later, this resistance slowly gave way throughout the revision process at the urging of her editor. In an online interview, Skloot explains,

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> [Y]ou don't learn anything about my backstory unless it's relevant to Deborah or to the family's story in some way. In the prologue, you learn that I didn't come from a religious background, that I came from the Pacific Northwest, and that I'm white – and those are specifically juxtaposed against Deborah. *You don't really learn that much about me as a character outside of their story*. That was what I constantly had in my head, that it only belonged if it was something relevant to their story. (Pitzer, 2010, emphasis added)

Juxtaposed against Skloot's acknowledgement, 'I realized it would be dishonest of me to leave myself out of the book' (Henry, 2011), this statement raises the question: What knowledge *belongs* in a story? And furthermore, what criteria should be used to define this? Skloot clearly has a standard: is this information relevant to Deborah or the family's story in some way? This is perhaps a sound ethical criterion. But is it epistemically defensible? And finally, if *Random Family* triggers the question: 'Whose knowledge is this?' *The Immortal Life* invites the following: 'Whose story is this?'

Epistemic location and knowledge claims

As previously stated, the distinctive narrative modes of *Random Family* and *The Immortal Life* produce different knowledge claims. In *Random Family*, such claims appear to be substantiated by the author's note which, for example, explains that in the 'cases where someone is said to have "thought" or "believed" something, those thoughts and beliefs were described and recounted to me by that person' (LeBlanc, 2004: 405). This statement sheds light on the verifiability of dialogue, but is complicated by narrative techniques such as indirect thought report with limited-perspective narration, blurring point of view and producing a sense of objective omniscience. As paratextual information suggests that disinterested objectivity does not describe LeBlanc's relationship with her subjects, the narrative mode invites analysis of the discrepancy between epistemic location and representation. The following passage illustrates this point. The preceding narration describes a shopping trip after which Coco, one of the book's main subjects, forgoes needed items for herself to buy clothes and gifts for her family. Coco's caseworker finds this concerning:

> Sister Christine wanted to tell Coco, *Get away from your family*. But she couldn't. Not everyone could clamber onto a lifeboat from a sinking raft. You either made your way by hardening up, like Iris, or you stayed stuck. Coco didn't see a choice. She admired Iris's accomplishments, but she couldn't live like that. Nor could she be like her older brother, Manuel, who dressed himself better than his children. Coco couldn't ignore the people she cared for, which is why Foxy and her little brother Hector turned to her first for help. The word that came to Sister Christine's mind whenever she thought of Coco was *enmeshed*. Coco would have said that she had heart. (LeBlanc, 2004: 148)

Here, thoughts of the subjects and judgements made by the author/narrator are seemingly impossible to tell apart. The author's note clarifies somewhat: 'thoughts' and 'beliefs' were described and recounted to LeBlanc (2004) by the person who held those beliefs (p. 405). In this context, the entire passage reads as indirect thought report of Sister Christine, with the exception, perhaps, of the last sentence. Is this a despairing

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acknowledgement from Sister Christine, or an authorial, advocatory rebuttal from LeBlanc? This is unclear. However, that 'Coco would have said that she had heart' coheres with Coco's characterisation, and given both Sister Christine and LeBlanc's intimate knowledge of Coco and her history, either interpretation is justifiable. This example of thought and speech report is typical of LeBlanc's seamless transitions between observation and focalisation; however, some passages are more difficult to differentiate. The following extract is an apposite example:

> Cesar complained about prison, but it sometimes seemed easier and more fun than Coco's life. Cesar had no children to feed and bathe and dress; he had no worries about basic necessities; he lived in a dorm with his friends. … Coco's limitations were her failures; but Cesar's immobility was the prison's fault. And Cesar still dictated the terms of the relationship – to choose her or cast her aside. (LeBlanc, 2004: 153)

LeBlanc's disclosure does not cover narrated passages such as these. The ideas are insightful, but it is unclear whose knowledge is represented, or who is making judgments here. Is this problematic? Code (1995) suggests it is. 'Questions about who knowers are, how they are located with respect to "objects" of inquiry, are integral to analyses of the production and justification of knowledge claims' (p. 106). The preceding paragraph is clearly LeBlanc's (2004) voice. She reports, 'Coco composed long letters in reply. She also copied by hand letters Cesar sent her to forward to his incarcerated friends. … These communications suited her indirect style' (p. 153). However, narrative voice notwithstanding, the passage in question could represent Cesar's judgment of Coco: his critical attitude towards her is a motif throughout the narrative. It could also be Coco's, as she would likely have reflected on the differences between her hardships and Cesar's to LeBlanc. But the absence of indicators of indirect thought report also suggests these might be LeBlanc's observations. The questions remain, 'Are these LeBlanc's, Cesar's or Coco's judgements?' 'Whose knowledge is offered here?' and 'Does LeBlanc act as a conduit for her subjects' voices, or does she depend on her epistemic location (her close proximity to but critical distance from her subjects, her education, knowledge of the legal system, etc.) to offer judgments to be received as truth claims? This is finally ambiguous.

Questions of 'truth-value' recur in passages like this throughout the narrative. From the disclosure in the author's note, the reader cannot verify that the knowledge on offer – that Cesar's incarceration was preferable to Coco's day-to-day living in the Bronx; that Coco's limitations were her failures; that Cesar's immobility was the prison's fault (rather than a result of his own behaviour) – is LeBlanc's. Is it accurate? Is it truthful? The question of accuracy applies if this knowledge is being reported from Cesar's or Coco's perspective; the question of truthfulness comes into play if it is LeBlanc's knowledge on offer here. If this is indeed her knowledge, does her scope of enquiry legitimate such knowledge and judgments? Or simply: Does she know enough to report as she does? The scope of LeBlanc's research indicates that LeBlanc had at least access to such knowledge; it is left to the reader to judge whether elements of epistemic location – again, her gender, socio-economic position and race – problematise her knowledge- and truth-claims. But the depth and complexity of reported relationships, events and their meanings throughout the narrative arguably deepen the authority and increase the defensibility of its epistemic foundation.

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The necessity of asking 'whose knowledge is this?' indicates that LeBlanc's presence is discernable in the book, despite the narrative mode. For Weber (1985), the absence of 'I' is a matter of appearance in literary non-fiction. Selection and arrangement of material reflects the reporter's presence – the writer is a 'reporting angel' (cf. pp. 73–88). Code (1995) similarly asserts 'there is no good reason to believe that knowledge as product could fail to bear the mark of its producers, or of the process of its production' (p. 106). In this case, the reader must rely on the observations and subsequent analyses of LeBlanc as a reliable narrator, without extensive notes to verify the narrative. Here, the illocutionary force of the non-fiction contract calls for the reader to trust LeBlanc if, indeed, analytical passages are not directly sourced from the thoughts or dialogue of the subject. In this sense, LeBlanc relies little on paratextual explanation, and heavily on trust. But this is not necessarily prohibitive. Allen (2008) quotes Onora O'Neill when he suggests that an increase in transparency does not necessarily lead to an increase in trust. In fact, O'Neill contends that 'trust precludes rather than requires transparency' (in Allen, 2008: 325). This is a moot point. But in the absence of clear indicators of a text's production, '[q]uestions about who knowers are, how they are located with respect to "objects" of inquiry' can play an important role in the justification of knowledge claims (Code, 1995: 106).

At times, LeBlanc's (2004) authorial voice is clearly discernable in the narrative, as is her 'location' with respect to her subjects. These are rare passages of narratorial transparency, but all the more rhetorically powerful for their thematic and symbolic value:

> [Cesar] smothered [his daughter's] hurt feelings with hugs, making it into a game, drowning out her crying with laughter and kisses and silly smooching sounds. In the subtle tyranny of that moment beat the pulse of Cesar's neighbourhood – the bid for attention, the undercurrent of hostility for so many small needs ignored and unmet, the pleasure of holding power, camouflaged in teasing, the rush of love. Then the moment passed, and Cesar's three-year-old daughter walked back out into the world and left him behind. (p. 162)

Here, the literary journalist's presence is briefly exposed in the narrative. In the bleakness of the moment, the reader becomes aware that this is LeBlanc's experience, too. A sense of helplessness pervades the scene; LeBlanc cannot intervene. Here, she is the advocatory journalist, perceptive critic and the 'reporting angel'; the ability to create her own subtly analytical moment and let it pass without pontificating is arguably a strength in a narrative that has been criticised for its lack of interpretive analysis (cf. Wypijewski, 2003).

The narrative mode in Skloot's text precludes the kinds of questions considered above while maintaining the same aim as LeBlanc – that of conveying her subjects' phenomenal reality. Mary Kubicek, for example, was the laboratory assistant present at Henrietta Lacks' autopsy. Skloot recreates the scene from her perspective. Mary stands in the doorway, panicking and concerned that she might faint, but also compelled to do her job. Henrietta's body is dehumanised – Mary is in the room 'with a corpse'. She wants to 'run out of the morgue and back to the lab', but approaches the body and greets Dr Wilbur, the pathologist. Then, to avoid looking at Henrietta's 'lifeless' eyes, she turns to look at the bare feet at the other end of the table. Skloot (2010) recounts,

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> 'When I saw those toenails', Mary told me years later, 'I nearly fainted. I thought, *Oh jeez, she's a real person*. I started to imagine her sitting in her bathroom painting those toenails, and it hit me for the first time that those cells we'd been working with all this time and sending all over the world, they came from a live woman. I'd never thought of it that way'. (pp. 90–91)

Mary's reaction here enacts a process Skloot is trying to facilitate for the reader. Her experience suggests that Henrietta was an abstraction for Mary, until her bright red toenails, immaculately kept during Henrietta's lifetime, were viewed during the autopsy. The detail brings Henrietta to 'life'. In the same way, Skloot aims to reorientate the reader to the narrative's external referentiality, or reality, through verifiable detail. To use a visual metaphor, Skloot makes the reader look at Henrietta, rather than through her. The combination of content and form of literary journalism facilitates this bi-referentiality: the story is compelling at the level of narrative, but 'the power of the real' (Carey, 1996: xxxvi) is at play both in Mary's and the reader's experience. Representation of fine detail (such as the shoe Skloot finds in Henrietta's dilapidated family home) deepens narrative coherence and correspondence, and verification authenticates other – less empirical – knowledges. Skloot's authorial presence guides the reader to an awareness not only of the materiality of the text, but also the reality of the subject. While LeBlanc authenticates her narrative through similar use of fine textual detail, the absence of reflexivity supports the narrative's inward referentiality. This promotes a level of engagement similar to a novel, but perhaps to the detriment of the advocatory role of the text.

A key point here, however, is that the discipline of verification does not solve all epistemic problems. Code (1987) is writing about fiction when she states, 'Acquiring an accurate, right *sense* of a situation is a primary epistemic task, then, just as a writer's attempt to find a right form of expression is, in large part, an epistemic problem' (p. 141, emphasis in original). But this comment also applies to literary journalism. Connery (1990) notes that writers have long

> grappled with finding the most effective form of prose discourse to make life comprehensible. … [The search] usually has signified a persistence in discovering ways to relate language and text, and a desire to discover the limitations of the printed word in recording and depicting reality. (p. 5)

For Skloot, finding the right form of expression was a long process, and her epitextual disclosure highlights some significant issues. In an online interview, Skloot discusses her initial reluctance to include herself in *The Immortal Life*:

> I teach writing, and I often say to my students, you know, 'Stop inserting yourself into other people's stories … where you don't belong'. … I actually get annoyed with writers who put themselves in stories. So I was very resistant to doing it … I kept saying, it's their story, it's not my story, and then at some point I realised that I had actually become a character in their story. (WKNOPBS, 2010)

This passage questions the role of a literary journalist's subjectivity when choosing a first-person narrative mode within an advocatory role. According to Code (1987), subjectivity 'involves recognising the full person-hood and epistemological centrality of

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knowing subjects' (p. 142). Skloot clearly recognises the subjectivity of the Lacks family members, but is she epistemically responsible about self-representation? She extends her explanation in another interview, reinforcing the ethical strand of representation:

> In the end, I realized it would be dishonest of me to leave myself out of the book. It wasn't about me inserting myself into their story, it was about admitting that I had become a character in their story without realizing it. It was, in a sense, disclosure. (Henry, 2011)

Skloot has been widely applauded for her transparent, ethical practice, but it is instructive to return to her resistance to 'inserting herself into other people's stories' to assess the epistemic implications of finding 'a right form of expression' (Code, 1987: 141).

The scene Skloot refers to in the interview mentioned earlier is one of the most dramatic in the narrative. The year is 2001, and there has just been a breakthrough in the search for Deborah's sister, Elsie. Elsie 'never went past a child in her head' (Skloot, 2010: 270) according to Deborah, and spent 5 years in Crownsville State Hospital where she was likely used as a subject for medical research before her death in 1955. After their discoveries, Skloot and Deborah decide to continue their journey and are staying in a hotel when Deborah, prone to volatile mood swings, reacts violently to a misinterpretation of Skloot's smile. She starts yelling, begins packing her sister's medical records into canvas bags, then suddenly rushes towards Skloot (2010: 283) and slams her up against a wall. Referring to this event, Skloot later recounted that during the drafting process,

> At first, I was barely present in any of the first-person parts of the book, because I was really holding back and not wanting to have it be about my emotions. It took a lot of revising to let myself have some reactions. Some of that was my editor. When she read the first version that I gave to her, she was like, 'OK, you seem like a psychopath in this scene, because Deborah just threw you against the wall, and she's screaming at you, and you don't react. You have to react'. My editor drew out a little of that emotional stuff that I was really hesitant to put in. (Pitzer, 2010)

The phrase 'A little of that emotional stuff', however, downplays Skloot's (2010) reaction to Deborah. This scene climaxes in the following way:

> 'Who sent you? Who's paying you?' she yelled, her hand still holding me against the wall. 'Who paid for this room?'
>
> 'We've been through this!' I said. 'Remember? Credit cards? Student loans?'
>
> Then, for the first time since we met, I lost my patience with Deborah. I jerked free of her grip and told her to get the fuck off me and chill the fuck out. She stood inches from me, staring wild-eyed again for what felt like minutes. Then, suddenly, she grinned and reached up to smooth my hair, saying, 'I never seen you mad before. I was starting to wonder if you was even human cause you never cuss in front of me'. (p. 284)

This passage raises some interesting – if demanding – points regarding representation and a 'right' form of expression. The first and most obvious point arising from this scene is that Skloot's reaction was not initially represented at all. In terms of epistemic location, she was central to this scene. She had knowledge of this event, factual and emotional, yet

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during the narrative's construction, Skloot acted on her role as advocate that this story was about Deborah, not herself. This decision appears consistent with Skloot's journalistic ethic: '[Y]ou don't learn anything about my backstory unless it's relevant to Deborah or to the family's story in some way' (Pitzer, 2010). But is it epistemically defensible? The effect of Skloot suppressing her reaction to Deborah's violent attack suggests not. According to her editor, representation in that case would have caused her to seem like a psychopath. The injunction: 'You have to react' indicates Skloot has to *reveal* her reaction. Is this disclosure transparency? Or is it sculpting a narrative? Can these two be separated? This example suggests not. It also shows how epistemic considerations are regularly superseded by more obvious ethical demands. A practitioner's duty of care to their subject and their story is high indeed, but the literary journalist's obligation to represent reality with a 'right' form of expression – despite how theoretically fraught that phrase may be – is at least of equal importance. This example demonstrates how 'cherished beliefs pose formidable bastions of opposition to epistemic change' (Code, 1987: 251), and highlights the tension between advocatory and epistemic concerns in the representation of 'real' events.

Fuller (1997) acknowledges that authors may choose to restrain emotions for personal or professional reasons, but claims that 'these complexities decline in importance when the writer establishes his presence clearly throughout the narrative' (p. 159). However, this example illustrates that epistemic complexities can in fact increase in importance when a practitioner in an advocatory role represents himself or herself. Skloot acknowledges that she has modified her practice – in opposition to her personal and professional belief – and this can be assessed as transparency disclosure. But that she was compelled to modify the scene by her editor, against her own judgment, suggests that there is room for some reflexive epistemic questioning in Skloot's practice. In this case, the epistemic community can be seen as working reliably; that is, her editor identified the nexus between Skloot's objectivist approach to her subject and her epistemic responsibility to faithfully represent reality. This tension is one that must be carefully managed in works of literary and advocatory journalism.

Epistemic location and narrative structure

While *Random Family* resists closure by virtue of its subjects' corporeality, its narrative arc does produce at least a sense of closure. For some, this may fix the world and imposes meaning on random events (cf. Wypijewski, 2003). From LeBlanc's perspective, however, facts gathered and subsequent knowledge produce meaning and truths, in the sense Code (1987) proposes. 'Understanding' here involves 'tying one's knowledge down: relating it to a context, having some conception of the relation of … knowledge to the rest of what one knows' (p. 150). The coherence in *Random Family* is primarily facilitated by structure. The narrative begins with Jessica, a 16-year-old whose pregnancy is related in the first chapter, and ends with her daughter Serena's 16th birthday. The latter passage both completes and begins a new cycle of teen pregnancy, and plays out the 'coming of age' referenced in the book's subtitle. Despite the phenomenal reality of the situation, LeBlanc's structural choices do create a layer of meaning. The tag-line provides extra emphasis – a glimpse at the sensibility behind the narratorial voice and a sense of inevitability about Serena's situation. That this occurs in the penultimate chapter

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places Serena's 16th birthday as the climax of the narrative, and fulfils the expectation set by the subtitle. What it means to 'come of age' then takes on increased significance through this frame, and is reinforced by the scene's position in the text.

LeBlanc also recounts a limousine ride, a gift from Serena's mother to her as she crosses the threshold into adulthood. This scene illustrates both the literal and symbolic dilemmas for three generations of Jessica's family. Serena and her friends want 'to leave the familiar world behind', but no one knows the direction out; similarly, Jessica wants more for Serena than Serena wants for herself, but, significantly, does not have a frame of reference outside of the Bronx. A critique might suggest that this scene's structural placement and symbolic power disregards the subjects' agency and the potential for alternatives for Jessica and Serena. Despite the formal lack of closure – no problems are resolved, and in the final chapter, Cesar is still in jail – the passages recounting Serena's birthday do seem to offer a conclusion: that this cycle of poverty is destined to repeat itself. Is this a 'truth'? Can this be verified? Or is it a function of LeBlanc's epistemic location: does her position render her unable to see or represent the possibility of agency for her subjects? Embedded within the narrative structure, and subject to future events which LeBlanc cannot foresee, verification is – at this stage – an impossibility. But here the critic can turn to an assessment of epistemic responsibility. Appropriate questions then become: What was LeBlanc's epistemic location in relation to her subjects? Did she have appropriate access to her subjects to infer this meaning? and Are her truth claims justifiable, given the evidence available to her at the time? That LeBlanc personally witnessed this cycle with two generations, and wrote extensively about Lourdes' (Jessica's mother's) similar experience suggests these questions can be answered in the affirmative.

The structure of a – much shorter – narrative arc can be tracked in *The Immortal Life.* Building on the previous analysis of Deborah and Skloot's volatile exchange, the way dialogue increases dramatic tension through this scene is noteworthy. Both direct and indirect speech are employed in this passage where Deborah's rage escalates while Skloot desperately tries to convince her that she is wrong. In the exchange of direct dialogue, Deborah 'snaps' and then 'yells', Skloot (2010) 'tells' and then 'yells', which builds to what should be the climactic moment:

> 'We've been through this!' I said. 'Remember? Credit cards? Student loans?'
>
> Then, for the first time since we met, I lost my patience with Deborah. I jerked free of her grip and told her to get the fuck off me and chill the fuck out. (p. 283)

The inquit tag 'said' here seems anomalous in such a volatile situation, particularly when used in conjunction with the exclamation mark. But the indirect representation of Skloot's own speech diffuses the climactic moment of the exchange. Had the final sentence of dialogue been represented directly, the passage would peak here. But, Skloot's – possibly exasperated, possibly desperate – cry is the last tone directly conveyed, before she loses patience and the scene ends in an anti-climax. For the rest of the chapter and well into the following chapter, Skloot is silent, apart from indirect representation of her thought and speech. The point here is perhaps hypercritical. But the purpose is to draw attention to the epistemic effects of skewing a narrative to emphasise the experience of the subject. In trying to give Deborah's experience 'full [rein]' (Code, 1987: 142), Skloot does

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not offer the reader knowledge that accurately reflects her own experience. This example is also interesting in that Skloot sets the highest standard in the peritext – verbatim representation – for reproducing dialogue. She appropriates the rationale of one of Henrietta's relatives: 'If you pretty up how people spoke and change the things they said, that's dishonest. It's taking away their lives, their experiences, and their selves' (Skloot, 2010: ix). While Skloot is particular about verbatim dialogue, she adopts the second part of this rationale for her subjects, but not for herself.

Conclusion

One could argue that LeBlanc's third-person narrative approach combined with comparatively low levels of disclosure transparency is less epistemically defensible than *The Immortal Life*, which exposes both process and perspective. Her decision not to make sources available opposes calls for increasing transparency; as Kathy Roberts Forde (2008) contends, 'transparency, not objectivity, may well be the news value that we most need in our postmodern age' (p. 218; cf. Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2001; Singer, 2007). The notion of transparency as an avenue to credibility is 'more in line with the demands, not to mention the zeitgeist, of today's media environment' (Hayes et al., 2007: 271). But while the lack of available epitextual sources protects *Random Family* from close scrutiny, an assessment of epistemic location suggests that despite differences in race, class, education and background, LeBlanc was well placed to produce and support the knowledge claims found in her text.

Skloot has been praised for the scope of her research, the quality of her reporting, and the emotional depth her narrative evokes. Indeed, this acclaim is well deserved. But analysis of epistemic location and narrative representation triggers the question: what is a literary journalist's epistemic duty to reveal how their subjectivity shapes the narrative? Here it has been argued that the first-person narrative mode conceals epistemological concerns that need to be addressed in the process of constructing a narrative. Ethical issues are undoubtedly central to *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*, but at times the emphasis on these may preclude rigorous epistemic questioning. Skloot (2010) harnesses 'the power of the real' to produce an emotionally engaging, vividly rendered narrative. It is indeed a 'moving' story of 'modern medicine and bioethics' and 'full of poignancy and humanity' (dustcover). But it also raises important epistemic questions that are useful for the continued theorisation and practice of literary journalism.

LeBlanc and Skloot are not merely members of an epistemic community. To appropriate Code's (1987) terminology again, these practitioners are both 'conservers and modifiers' of literary journalistic practice. As such, they have a 'constitutive role' to conduct their 'moral and intellectual life so as to contribute to the creation and preservation of the best possible standards appropriate to the practices within which one lives' (p. 194). Both practitioners are clearly cognisant of this responsibility, and demonstrate a high degree of epistemic awareness in their role as advocates for their subjects. While Code (1987) writes that 'it is not possible to devise a rule of thumb for assessing the epistemic responsibility of other persons' (p. 175), she nevertheless advocates enquiry – both critical and reflexive – into individuals' epistemic location. As demonstrated, this type of analysis can probe apparently transparent or opaque texts to validate or prob-

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lematise these claims – an important function if narrative literary journalism is to maintain its advocatory power.

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