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December 2014

# Analysing literary journalism: Twentieth century stories: objectivity and authority in Wilkerson and Hersey

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## Recommended Citation

Schulte, Bret, Analysing literary journalism: Twentieth century stories: objectivity and authority in Wilkerson and Hersey, *Current Narratives*, 4, 2014, 3-16.

Available at: <http://ro.uow.edu.au/currentnarratives/vol1/iss4/3>

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## Analysing literary journalism: Twentieth century stories: objectivity and authority in Wilkerson and Hersey

### **Abstract**

Isabel Wilkerson's award-winning *The Warmth of Other Suns* (2010) is an evolutionary marker for transparency and authority in a genre that remains in flux. This paper examines the presence/absence of the narrator in this masterwork, in particular how Wilkerson negotiates the journalistic goal of objectivity and the inevitable confrontation with subjectivity. This paper argues that Wilkerson taps the literary tradition of John Hersey's *Hiroshima* (1946). Like *Hiroshima*, Wilkerson's *Warmth* embodies the soundest of journalistic conventions: third person point of view, extensive sampling/interviews, and secondary research. Structurally, *Warmth* also mirrors *Hiroshima*. Wilkerson chose characters that span spectrums of privilege, age, and circumstance, winnowed down as emblematic of a cast of millions who fled the Jim Crow South. Just as in *Hiroshima*, the camera eye rotates among them, providing alternating vignettes in an advancing chronology. However, Wilkerson breaks from Hersey in important ways, namely the authorial detachment that has come to be known as *Hiroshima's* hallmark. Wilkerson, on the other hand, has been praised for her empathy and transparency. She lays bare her connection to the story, her techniques, and her decision-making process in an extensive methodology section written in first-person. In a historical moment marked by increased reader anxiety and distrust of the press, the reception of *Warmth* has rewarded this subjectivity and increased transparency.

# Twentieth century stories: objectivity and authority in Wilkerson and Hersey

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**ABSTRACT:** Isabel Wilkerson's award-winning *The Warmth of Other Suns* (2010) is an evolutionary marker for transparency and authority in a genre that remains in flux. This paper examines the presence/absence of the narrator in this masterwork, in particular how Wilkerson negotiates the journalistic goal of objectivity and the inevitable confrontation with subjectivity. This paper argues that Wilkerson taps the literary tradition of John Hersey's *Hiroshima* (1946). Like *Hiroshima*, Wilkerson's *Warmth* embodies the soundest of journalistic conventions: third person point of view, extensive sampling/interviews, and secondary research. Structurally, *Warmth* also mirrors *Hiroshima*. Wilkerson chose characters that span spectrums of privilege, age, and circumstance, winnowed down as emblematic of a cast of millions who fled the Jim Crow South. Just as in *Hiroshima*, the camera eye rotates among them, providing alternating vignettes in an advancing chronology. However, Wilkerson breaks from Hersey in important ways, namely the authorial detachment that has come to be known as *Hiroshima's* hallmark. Wilkerson, on the other hand, has been praised for her empathy and transparency. She lays bare her connection to the story, her techniques, and her decision-making process in an extensive methodology section written in first-person. In a historical moment marked by increased reader anxiety and distrust of the press, the reception of *Warmth* has rewarded this subjectivity and increased transparency.

The protection of journalism—and to a degree, journalists—is enshrined in the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, meaning that as a constitutionally protected practice, journalism is nearly as old as the United States itself. But what it is, and who does it, and how, remains a work in progress. You might say the final version is still unpublished.

This ongoing rewrite of journalism is striking when viewing two groundbreaking works of long-form journalism published 64 years apart: John Hersey's *Hiroshima*, first published in 1946 and Isabel Wilkerson's *The Warmth of Other Suns*, in 2010. The books invite comparison because of striking similarities in content, theme, and structure. But the juxtaposition reveals changing notions of narrative authority, accountability to audiences, journalistic transparency, and an ongoing evolution of ideas about objectivity.

## Objectively Speaking

Nearly a century after the term “objectivity” was first associated with journalism, scholars and practitioners are still debating its merit—even its very definition (Munoz-Torres 2012, p. 579). Frequently, objectivity is linked to August Comte's theory of positivism, which provides a utilitarian view of epistemology that is tailor-made for delivering the news: What your senses tell you is pretty much all you know. With positivism as its guide, modern mainstream news came to focus on facts, such as who, what, where, when—and, with a bit more trouble—how and why. Journalism scholar Charlotte Wien has argued that “most journalism, as is the case with

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most of the scientific world, continues to utilize a positivist concept of objectivity” (Wien 2005, p. 3).

There are two generally recognized methods of achieving said objectivity, an epistemological approach and an ethical approach. The first manifests as a neutral recitation of facts. The second emphasizes a reporter’s integrity, in other words, presenting a story in a way that is fair, with balance given to opposing sides. However, as Juan Ramón Muñoz-Torres (2012) puts it in his discourse on the subject, “Of course one cannot draw a line separating the epistemological side from the ethical one, since are both related, as mind and will are in all human beings” (p. 570).

The unifying idea is that by and large values should be separated from facts. In 2001, sociologist Michael Schudson, who has written perhaps the most extensively about the culture of American news media, described objectivity as “a moral ideal” (p. 149). He identified an objectivity norm, which calls on the journalist to be cool, rather than emotional, in tone and report news “without commenting on it.”

Objectivity—or notions thereof—is ubiquitous in the American press. Although Jay Rosen (1993, p. 48) is a strident critic of traditional interpretations of objectivity as balance he still called it “one of the identifying features of journalism in the United States” and perhaps its most important contribution to journalism worldwide. Scholar Wolfgang Donsbach’s work confirms the idea. “The United States is the country where the ideal of objective journalism was born” (1995, p. 18).

How and why the objectivity norm was established with such force in American journalism—much more so than in Europe or other parts of the globe—remains a topic of debate. Some have argued it was the result of newspapers finding greater commercial success appealing to general audiences than partisan ones. In the years leading up to the Revolutionary War, Samuel Adams helped turned the colonial press from a largely passive machine into a political and propaganda-breathing monster. His partisan columns excoriating the British crown’s taxation of the colonies first appeared in the *Boston Gazette* in 1764. Eventually, he created a system of distribution across the colonies for anti-British news and commentary that historian Rodger Streitmatter (2012, p. 4) called “a precursor of today’s Associated Press.”

Partisanship of the press continued well into the 19<sup>th</sup> century, at which point a growing national economy turned newspapers into money machines with large circulations and a broad range of advertisers. Publishers soon found that advertisers were their best revenue source. And advertisers wanted to reach as big an audience as possible, Democratic or Republican. “Accordingly, reporters writing news came to focus more on making stories and less on promoting parties” (Schudson 2001, p. 156).

Another explanation hinges on technological innovation, namely the telegraph, which allowed copy to be sent over the wire, forced uniformity and put a price on word count. The telegraph broke wire services of partisanship by forcing them to write articles that could be used by any paper across the country, according to the theory’s chief advocate, James Carey (1992). And that wasn’t all. “The wire services demanded a form of language stripped of the local, the regional; and colloquial. They demanded something closer to scientific language” (Carey 1992, p. 210). Furthermore, words cost money. Facts were at a premium; commentary was slashed.

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Beyond these arguments, Schudson (2001) says the norm of objectivity was articulated, not just embraced, by journalists, editors, and publishers in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century who sought to standardize reportage, create an occupational community, and, significantly, to endow a once-lowly profession with integrity. Schudson notes that once newspapers ceased operation as solely partisan organs, journalists faced an onslaught of propaganda from public-relations wings of corporations and governmental entities. By closing ranks around the values of objectivity, they asserted their professionalism (Schudson 2001, pp.162-163). A testimony to that new sense of professionalism: The American Society of Newspaper Editors, formed in 1922. Its code of ethics included the principles of “truthfulness, accuracy and impartiality (Schudson 2001, p. 163).” By 1928, the word objectivity also appeared in ASNE public proceedings (Streckfuss 1990, p. 974).

**Progressivism In The Press**

Objectivity also made sense at a historical moment of progressivism, an age of social reform dominated by rapidly developing scientific research, technology, and an emphasis on reason. Scholar and journalism professor Richard Streckfuss (1990) described the era as one of “flourishing naturalism,” which saw the development of a “school of thought holding that there are no *a priori* truths, that attempts to explain the universe in metaphysical terms foster not understanding but ignorance and superstition” (p. 975). Born from this progressive pursuit, the ideals of objectivity directed journalists away from speculation, emotion, and sensationalism and toward the real and the tangible, of what could be supported with evidence. Streckfuss argued, “it was inevitable” that scientific principles would be applied to journalistic practice. “The term *objectivity* described this effort. In its original sense, objectivity meant finding the truth through the rigorous methodology of the scientist” (p. 975)

Modern-day scholars credit Walter Lippmann, the era’s great public champion of liberalism, with advancing the ideals of what he called “objective testimony” in his 1920 collection of essays, *Liberty and the News*, out of concern that “the press was whipping up a jingoistic, right-wing fever in the country” (Lippmann, cited in Streckfuss 1990, p. 978). Lippmann blasted the press for repeating propaganda as truth, salivating over tabloid-style stories, and covering government only inasmuch as a source for scandal. He regarded the press as too populist, i.e. too sensationalist, in its taste to be trusted to provide an accurate measure of the health of civic affairs and to elevate the public and its institutions. In his 1922 essay, *Public Opinion*, Lippmann argued, “It is because they are compelled to act without a reliable picture of the world, that governments, schools, newspapers and churches make such small headway against the more obvious failings of democracy, against violent prejudice, apathy, preference for the curious trivial as against the dull important, and the hunger for sideshows and three-legged calves” (Lare & Rossiter eds. 1963, p. 422). In the essay he seemed to have abandoned any hope for a better press, or better government, but he made the case that the more “objective criteria” that are introduced, “the more perfectly an affair can be presented as news” (p. 401).

By 1931, however, Lippmann’s mood had improved. Why? The press, in fits and starts, had started taking his advice. In Lippmann’s estimation, “...the most impressive event of the last decade in the history of newspapers has been the demonstration that the objective, orderly, and comprehensive presentation of news is a far more successful type of journalism today than the

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dramatic, disorderly, episodic type” (p. 405). Lippmann praised what he called this “new journalism” as being more independent and for drawing a broader audience, which in turn, attracted more advertisers. Such journalism would continue to gather strength, he believed, because it would attract more educated folks to the industry, or what he called “trained intelligence in newspaper work” (p. 405).

**Hersey And Hiroshima**

It is true that the prestige of journalism swelled in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, thanks to the groundbreaking work of muckrakers and, later the rise of so-called “smart magazines,” such as *The New Yorker*, which mirrored the concerns and tastes of a rising class of bourgeoisie. Stylistically, journalism continued to evolve, moving beyond reports simply focused on facts and into the realm of literary storytelling. The evolution of style and the elevation of the press spawned a generation of celebrity journalists: John Hersey, Lillian Ross, Joseph Mitchell, A.J. Liebling, James Agee and more. (The mystique of journalism grew so great that even novelists—long considered the sole occupants of a literary Olympus—lowered themselves to try their hands at the emerging genre. Ernest Hemingway and John Dos Passos took turns as war correspondents.)

A journalist himself for such magazines as *Life* and *Time*, Hersey famously exhibited the ideals of progressive American objectivism in “Hiroshima,” his dispassionate yet painstakingly detailed account of six survivors of the atomic bomb—what Hersey scholar David Sanders (1967) called “carrying the theme of survival to the limits of human possibility” (p. 50). Despite the technological terror of the bomb, despite the agony of the Japanese survivors, despite Hersey’s talent for chilling images, *Hiroshima* is nearly devoid of emotion. Hersey gives no analysis and largely abstains from indulging his subjectivity. He not only obscures his own point of view, he obscures his country’s. Readers get nothing about U.S. motivation for the bomb. History and context are scant. What little information readers do get about the United States ends the moment the bomb drops. From there, the story belongs to the Japanese.

Hersey’s lack of interest in the American version of events surrounding the atomic bomb—a version already well known by his audience—puts him squarely in the “epistemological” camp outlined by Muñoz-Torres rather than the “ethical” one. American points of view – that the bomb was fitting retribution for the attack on Pearl Harbor and/or was a swift and justifiably powerful end to Japanese aggression – are not only absent in *Hiroshima*, they are countermanded by that very absence. Writing in 2012, as Japan struggled with the radioactive fallout of the crippled Fukushima nuclear power plant, essayist Dan Gerstle (2012) called *Hiroshima* a “challenge to the narratives of martial triumph and technological utopianism surrounding the bomb” (p. 90).

While the so-called ethical view of objectivity might dictate that Hersey give voice to an American viewpoint as well as a Japanese one, an epistemological approach allowed Hersey to devote himself to a clinically detached, albeit painfully visual, re-creation of the hours and days after the atomic bomb. That demonstrably impassable style is not only a signature of the book but Hersey’s chief contribution to the development of literary nonfiction. “Today, when you read an artful, unsentimental magazine article or book about grunts in a firefight or cruising

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down an IED-infested street, you are reading Hersey's journalistic patrimony" (Gerstle 2012, p. 91).

As the curtain lifts on *Hiroshima*, the audience sees six residents of the city at the moment the bomb is dropped. A doctor carries a blood sample; a German priest reads a Jesuit magazine. From the narrator, readers learn that they will be among the survivors of a bomb that killed a hundred thousand people. Readers expecting apocalyptic atmospherics will be disappointed. Hersey's naturalistic narrative continues, an unblinking camera eye that absorbs the objective details of what was said and what was done. Hersey scholar David Sanders (1967) commends the author for writing that is "compact, tightly but not quite contrivedly organized, with many of the hardest maxims of expository writing carefully obeyed" (p. 44). Sanders also remarked on what Hersey doesn't provide: elaboration, analysis and commentary. Hersey's stranglehold on his own subjectivity spills over into his treatment of his subjects, favoring for his re-creation of events what the survivors said and did rather than what they thought or felt. Sanders calls the writing "utterly unmarred by any lingering impulse that Hersey may have had to say more about the first atomic bomb than the details themselves conveyed" (p. 44).

Hersey's commitment to minimalism can be found in even the most anguishing passages of *Hiroshima*. The night of the bombing a woman complaining of being cold despite the heat from the city's fires, approaches Father Kleinsorge:

She began to shiver heavily, and again said it was cold. Father Kleinsorge borrowed a blanket from someone nearby and wrapped her up, but she shook more and more, and said again, "I am so cold," and then she suddenly stopped shivering and was dead. (1989, p. 45)

Hersey offers no comment on her death. Instead, the camera swings immediately to Mr. Tanimoto, a Methodist priest, as he works to save injured men and women in danger of drowning in a rising tide:

He reached down and took a woman by the hands, but her skin slipped off in huge, glove-like pieces. He was so sickened by this, he had to sit down for a moment. (1989, p. 45)

Hersey relied on Tanimoto's actions to convey the natural—and, no doubt, widely shared—response of revulsion to the widespread human mutilation. The simple act of sitting down, which interrupts Tanimoto's frantic efforts to help as many victims as possible, carries the emotional freight that Hersey declined to carry as narrator. Later in the passage, Hersey writes that Mr. Tanimoto:

...lifted the slimy living bodies out and carried them up the slope and away from the tide. He had to keep consciously repeating to himself, "These are human beings." It took him three trips to get them all across the river. When he had finished, he decided to have a rest, and he went back to the park. (1989 pp. 45-46)

The passage provides one of the rare occasions when Hersey enters the mind of a subject. But even Hersey's decision to reveal Tanimoto's interior monologue—"These are human beings."—is clipped and framed as an action. The words are not merely presented as a thought.

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They run through Tanimoto's mind over and over, as if on a spool, while he saves what lives he can. What readers do not learn are the more ineffable aspects of this moment. No attempt is made to put words to the feelings, the sensation, or the subjectivity of Tanimoto's experience. In this objective account, the actions—what was done and what was said, even if it was only to himself—stand as the truth of that day.

When Father Kleinsorge sees the “terrible flash,” he is convinced he is right under the bomb, meaning certain death. “Then, for a few seconds or minutes, he went out of his mind” (p. 13). The description of Kleinsorge's psychotic episode ends there, presumably Kleinsorge couldn't be trusted to give an accurate account of his actions or his thoughts while “out of his mind.” The objective truth—one grounded only in what facts are available and what can be perceived through the senses—means that what happened next is unknowable and cannot be written. The result is a strangely affecting scene that forces readers to imagine the hysteria on their own. By providing less, one could argue that Hersey requires his audience to do more, involving readers in the text by making them actively imagine rather than passively read.

***Hiroshima Hits The Public***

The sensation created by “Hiroshima” is almost impossible to overstate. When it appeared in the Aug. 31, 1946 issue of *The New Yorker*, it was (and still is) the only story to occupy an entire issue of magazine, replacing even its popular cartoons (Sharp 2000, p. 434). The article quickly dominated the public sphere. ABC Radio hired actors to read the story word-for-word in a broadcast that spanned four days, resulting in an honorable mention for “Outstanding Educational Program” from the Peabody Awards (Peabody Awards 2013). In book form, *Hiroshima* was published nearly worldwide, with the notable exception of Japan (Hulse 1983, p. 37.) In the United States, The Book-of-the-Month Club distributed copies for free. Club president Harry Scherman said, “We find it hard to conceive of anything being written that could be of more importance at this moment to the human race” (Sanders 1967, p. 49).” Purportedly, Albert Einstein and presidential adviser Bernard Baruch combined to buy 1,500 copies. The book has become standard reading in high school and college classrooms (Hulse 1989, p. 37).

But Hersey's style—what might be called radicalized objectivity when set against the face of tragedy on such an unfathomable scale—had an unintended effect on at least some readers. They were turned off by his impersonal tone, his flat and exhaustive depiction of facts and details, and the fact that Hersey left moral questions only to his characters. Scholar Kingsley Widmer suggested *The New Yorker* editors were to blame for the style, which he considered “weirdly understated and depersonalized” (Widmer, cited in Frus 1994, p. 93). The reviewer for the *Times Literary Supplement* felt that Hersey's understated response to the atomic bomb wasn't up to the task, writing that Hersey “let the facts speak for themselves, and they have not spoken loud enough” (Frus 1994, pp. 93-94). Critic Dwight Macdonald (1946) called it a “moral deficiency” (p. 308). Some readers, meanwhile, perceived the stoicism of *Hiroshima* as rather racially stereotypical portrayal of the Japanese (Frus 1994, p. 94). Phyllis Frus said Hersey's style falls into definitions of sensationalism by treating the characters as spectacles. She accused Hersey of exploiting the subjects, and “because Hersey refuses to analyze or consider his relation to his

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subjects, we end up with a depoliticized journalism that reproduces ‘the way things are’ (1994 p. 95).

Furthermore, Hersey achieved that objectivity, in part, by keeping invisible his own connection to the story and the methods he employed to report it. That decision stands in stark contrast to the one made by his contemporary, James Agee. In his landmark work, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941), Agee wrote in the first-person and acknowledged that his subjectivity limited his ability to fathom human nature in general, and the subjects of his book. Hersey, for his part, maintained a conventional third-person narrative that delivered a level of omniscience, albeit one limited to the actions of his six subjects. The purpose of that omniscience—the unblinking camera eye that understands the worlds through its material details—was revealed in 1986 in an essay Hersey wrote for the *Yale Review*: “In fiction, the writer’s voice matters; in reporting the writer’s authority matters” (Hersey 1986, p. 308). Clearly, Hersey believed that his objective approach to the story provided the authority the book needed. Such was Hersey’s belief in the authority of the text that he declined to answer questions about the book until the 1980s. It wasn’t until interviews with *Publishers Weekly* in 1984 and *The Paris Review* in 1986, that readers learned how the reporting occurred and how editorial decisions were made regarding a story that had a profound impact on the public’s understanding of the atomic bomb. In *The Paris Review*, readers saw what was as close to a methodology as Hersey could offer. His idea, inspired by Thornton Wilder’s novel *Bridge of San Luis Rey*, was to “take a number of people – half a dozen, as it turned out in the end – whose paths crossed each other and came to this moment of shared disaster. So I went to Hiroshima and began right away to look for the kinds of people who would fit that pattern” (Dee 1986, n.p.). The process led to interviews of 40 to 50 candidates. He narrowed it down to six. Hersey said that in three weeks, he had their stories. It took him about a month to write the article.

However, Wilder wrote with flair; Hersey chose to be “deliberately quiet in the piece” in order to present the horror directly to the reader (Dee 1986, n.p.). The idea that the reader could relate to the character without interference from the narrator was also borrowed from fiction. In journalism, Hersey said, “the reader is conscious of the journalist presenting material to him. This was one of the reasons why I had experimented with the devices of fiction in doing journalism, in the hopes that my mediation would, ideally, disappear” (Dee 1986 n.p.). Of course, mediation can be limited but not eliminated. Mediation occurs with every editorial choice the writer makes: the selection of facts, details, and quotes, by bringing one character to life, and by leaving another in obscurity. And Hersey’s subjectivity appeared in telling fashion. Contemporary historian and critic John Hartsock (2000), notes that on rare occasions Hersey made himself visible in the text—an apparition that would quickly, if faintly appear, such as in this passage: “It would be impossible to say what horrors were embedded in the minds of the children who lived through the day”—an acknowledgement of the author’s subjective limitations (p.187). It is an acknowledgement, albeit characteristically understated, remarkably similar to Agee’s.

## The Warmth Of Subjectivity

*The Warmth of Other Suns* is in many ways both a celebration and a critique of *Hiroshima*, sharing much in the way of its origins, purpose, structure, and themes. Isabel Wilkerson, however, takes the idea of subjectivity in the face of mass human suffering much further than Hersey. *The Warmth of Other Suns* can be viewed as a response to changing notions about objectivity, transparency, and authority as a norm of journalistic professionalism.

The shared heritage of the books can be traced back to the careers of the writers. Both were working journalists trained in mainstream American newsrooms. Hersey, who had grown up in China as the son of missionaries, wrote primarily for *Time* and *Life* as a war correspondent in the 1940s. Sanders (1967) notes that Hersey's first novel, *Men on Bataan* (1942), carried all the hallmarks of a traditional journalist accustomed to "reducing piles of notes and cabled material to truncated columns" (p. 23). Later in the decade, as a Far East correspondent, Hersey added *The New Yorker* to his portfolio. The magazine sent him to Hiroshima to cover the aftermath of the bomb in any way he chose. He emerged with the tales of a handful of survivors told with dedication to detail and an unshaken commitment to journalistic detachment.

Isabel Wilkerson, born and raised in Washington, D.C., spent the majority of her news career at *The New York Times*. While the Chicago Bureau Chief in 1994, Wilkerson won the Pulitzer Prize for feature writing—the first Pulitzer won by a black woman. A natural at narrative nonfiction, Wilkerson soon turned her attention to a massive book-length work of journalism, *The Warmth of Other Suns*, which would take her 15 years to report and write (Newkirk 2013). It didn't create the sensation of *Hiroshima*, but it got within striking distance. Her book appeared on eight bestseller lists, ten book-of-the-year lists, and won The National Book Critics Circle Award for Nonfiction, The Mark Lynton History Prize, The Hillman Book Award and many others. Several cities, including Chicago, selected it for a community reading program (Chicago Office of the Mayor 2013). The book has entered college classrooms (C-SPAN 2011); made Oprah's Book Club – a kingmaker in the publishing world – and was on the summer reading list of President Barack Obama (Tartar 2011.)

The shared experience at traditional American news outlets is evident in the two books, which feature such sound journalistic conventions as news worthiness, multiple sources, extensive interviews, and outside research. They chose topics of tremendous magnitude and found individuals to represent masses of people difficult to conceptualize in their entirety. Hersey plucked six characters from the survivors in Hiroshima, then a city of 245,000. Wilkerson anointed three to stand for the six million migrants from the South. To re-create those lives, both writers interviewed subjects at length—days, weeks, and in Wilkerson's case, months and years.

Though Hersey and Wilkerson have relatively little in common—they are of different generations, race, and sex—they engaged the same thematic material, the reality of human annihilation, physically and morally. Their journalism documents the survival instinct while striking notes of universal humanism as they sought to disabuse readers of racism.

In *Warmth*, Wilkerson seeks to dispel the stigma of "the other" that separated African Americans from the immigrant heritage of white Americans. The parallels are too great, she

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argues. Like immigrants sailing across the Atlantic, black Americans moving north and west faced a new life as a foreigner. Of black migrants, Wilkerson writes:

They would cross into alien lands with fast, new ways of speaking and carrying oneself and with hard-to-figure rules and laws. The New World held out higher wages but staggering rents that the people had to calculate like foreign currency. The places they went were big, frightening and already crowded—New York, Detroit, Chicago, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, and smaller, equally foreign cities—Syracuse, Oakland, Milwaukee, Newark, Gary. Each turned into a “receiving station and port of refuge,” wrote the poet Carl Sandburg, then a Chicago newspaper reporter documenting the unfolding migration there. (2010, p. 9)

The Japanese in Hersey’s journalism are not monolithic. Individuals act within a spectrum of courage, fear, disbelief, altruism, and self-preservation. A Japanese mother is so traumatized that she holds onto her dead infant for days, irrationally believing that her soldier husband will appear to say good-bye. In another act of despair, a diocesan secretary runs into a burning home to immolate himself. Dr. Fujii frees himself from his collapsed hospital, rescues two nurses and then quite rationally seeks to recover at a friend’s house in a nearby village. Mr. Tanimoto, meanwhile, desperately tries to aid every victim in his path, barely acknowledging the miracle of finding his wife amid the chaos before returning to his work. Hersey’s grandest gesture of pluralism was simply telling the story from the perspective of the Japanese.

By employing the points of view of marginalized groups, Hersey and Wilkerson both defied dominant narratives. Hersey’s focus on victimized civilians resisted the idea that the Japanese deserved what they got, while challenging American celebrations of victory.” And while some scholars had long made the case that life for black Americans did not much improve after the Civil War, Wilkerson took that idea to a mass audience. A review of *Warmth* in the academic journal *Contemporary Sociology* commended Wilkerson for making the point that six million people fleeing a region amounted to more than “just a demographic shift, but an action of then-unparalleled black agency” (Hughey 2012, p. 380):

*Warmth* does not aspire to sociological rigor in terms of theory or methodology. Properly, it is narrative non-fiction. Yet, it demonstrates both a wealth of data and well-founded analysis without either hubris or conjecture

... the reader is reminded of the heterogeneity of both black socio-economic status and migratory motivations that were sewn together by the nightmare of race-based violence and the class-angst of the elusive American Dream. (Hughey 2012, p. 380)

The narratives in *Warmth* and *Hiroshima* are presented largely without concern for counterbalance. Just as Hersey abandoned American narratives of the bomb in favor of an isolated Japanese experience, Wilkerson gives little voice to the white Southerner in the Jim Crow era, except as players in the story of Southern blacks. In this passage, white Southern planters enter black sharecropper Ida Mae’s world, literally in a show of force in a search for a suspected thief. The violation of privacy, and the threat of violence proves pivotal to the decision of Ida Mae and her husband, George, to leave Mississippi for Chicago:

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Later that night, around nine or ten o'clock, the pounding started on Ida Mae's door. It was like the sound of wild dogs trailing raw meat. It seemed far away at first, and then it drew closer, mad fists beating the bare face of the cabin. The cabin was dark, and Ida Mae was asleep.

...Ida Mae cracked open the door and saw the men, four or five of them with chains and shotguns. She recognized the boss man, Mr. Edd. And she recognized his friend Mr. Willie Jim, another planter, but could not make out the faces of the others standing before her in the middle of the night (Wilkerson 2010, p. 125).

Throughout the text, Wilkerson engages in the same epistemological approach to objectivity as Hersey, saturating her book with details of character, place, and plot. Wilkerson's specifics accumulate to create a sense of realism in the same way Hersey sought: to bring life to a particular experience—individually idiosyncratic but together representative of a larger, more coherent whole. Both reporter/writers sought to enhance their understanding of their respective casts by consulting secondary texts. For *Hiroshima*, the documents Hersey read en route to Japan included a letter laying out the bomb's moral quandary to the Holy See by Father Kleinsorge, who was eventually selected as a character for the book (Dee 1986). Wilkerson's use of secondary sources—far more expansive—included consulting scores of previous news reports, historical documents, and sociological and anthropological research (Wilkerson 2010 pp. 555-587).

In addition to inviting comparisons of authors, themes, and journalistic conventions, the books' very structures are a near mirror of one another. What *Hiroshima* borrowed from *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, Wilkerson's *Warmth* seems to borrow from *Hiroshima*. Both follow multiple protagonists and alternate among them as the chronology advances. Dan Gerstle (2012) describes the structure as "cutting at climactic moments from one character to another, as if he were editing a movie. The result is a report that speaks for a city, and even a nation, and that retains its immediacy to this day" (p.90). Gerstle was speaking of *Hiroshima* but he could just as easily be speaking of Wilkerson's *Warmth*.

### **Wilkerson's Voice Of Authority**

Although the books pursue similar ideas of an epistemological objectivity, Wilkerson found opportunities to engage the authorial subjectivity that Hersey so ardently avoided. Wilkerson rejected neutrality and detachment—central tenets of conventional objectivity and prized by Hersey, who passed no such judgment on the atomic bomb. She articulated a clear position on the brutal legacy of the Jim Crow era, the violence of which gave African Americans no choice but to leave. Wilkerson recounts the lynching of Claude Neal in Florida for allegedly raping and killing a white woman. The man was castrated, tortured, hanged nearly to the point of death, cut down to be burned with irons, and dragged to death. The man's digits were made into souvenirs; so were images on postcards. Later, it was revealed the woman and Neal were lovers and her family may have been responsible for her death. Wilkerson concludes the grisly passage with analysis and perspective conspicuously absent from *Hiroshima*, calling that lynching and others in Florida as "among the most heinous acts of terrorism committed anywhere in the South" (p. 62).

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Whereas Hersey sought to erase the journalist as a mediator of subject and audience, Wilkerson embraced and made evident her role of analyst, researcher and storyteller, easing modern concerns about media transparency and integrity. And, early in the text – just a dozen pages into the hard-back edition – Wilkerson acknowledged her connection to the story and her reporting methods. To do this, she broke from the traditionally journalistic third-person point of view used to introduce readers to her three primary characters. In first-person voice that reveals her own subjective experiences and perceptions of the Great Migration, Wilkerson described a sepia-colored photograph she found in her childhood home that helps explain why this story is personal. The picture showed two young, black women:

The one in the pearls used to greet the train when she was little and dream of going with it. She would become a teacher, and years later, my mother. As a girl, I found the picture in a drawer in the living room, where many of those artifacts of migration likely ended up. I stared into the faces, searched the light in their eyes, the width of their smiles for clues as to how they got there. (2010 p. 12).

Almost above all else – and in contrast to *Hiroshima – The Warmth of Other Suns* emphasizes methodology. In an interview with *Columbia Journalism Review*, Wilkerson said: “The methodology is an extension of who I am” (Newkirk 2012). She likened it to a mix of ethnography, anthropology, sociology, and journalism. The methodology is explained on page 13 of the hardback edition, interrupting the conventional third-person point of view and employing a first-person explanation that addresses potential reader questions and/or anxiety about the validity of the material. She writes:

The stories in this book are based on the accounts of people who gave hundreds of hours of their days to share with me what was perhaps the singular turning point in their lives. They were among more than twelve hundred people I interviewed for this book in New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, Milwaukee, and Oakland. All of them journeyed from the South during the Great Migration, and it is their collective stories that inform every aspect of this book. (2010 p. 13)

Verifiable details, she continued, were corroborated by documentation. The methodology is elaborated upon at the back of the book, where it is joined by five pages of selected interviews and sources as well as 33 pages of annotated notes detailing and expanding on research and interviews presented in the book. It was central to the book’s marketing—appearing on the home page of the book’s website and the first paragraph of the summary in the hardback’s dust cover, which entices potential readers with assurances of Wilkerson’s hard-gained and exclusive knowledge of the material: “Wilkerson interviewed more than a thousand people and gained access to previously untapped data and official records, to write this definitive and vividly dramatic account...” Much the same appears in the Q&A with the author on her website. The methodology is also the focus of rumination in feature article about and reviews of the book. *The New Yorker* dubbed Wilkerson’s indefatigable pursuit of the Great Migration stories a “one-woman W.P.A project,” a reference to the Depression-era Works Progress Administration, which

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employed more than six thousand writers in its Federal Writers' Project tasked with documenting the lives of ordinary people (Lepore 2010).

Wilkerson's methodology, while not scientific, was rigorous and meticulous. She traveled the north and west, interviewing more than 1200 people who shared "preliminary versions of their experiences" (Wilkerson 2010, p. 540). She narrowed that list down to three dozen before settling on "three complementary subjects through whose lives I hoped to re-create the broad sweep of the movement" (Wilkerson 2010, p. 540). She found subjects who spanned spectrums of privilege, age, sex, socioeconomic status, and geography—a male doctor from Louisiana, a female sharecropper from Mississippi, a male citrus picker from Florida—carefully selected as emblematic of a cast of millions.

Hersey's methodology, it should be noted, was far less sophisticated and entirely unknown to the audience. He did not seek the most representative survivors of the atomic bomb, he sought survivors "whose paths crossed each other and came to this moment of shared disaster"—ala *the Bridge of San Luis Rey*, whose structure inspired *Hiroshima* (Dee 1986 n.p.). In the methodology section of *Warmth*, Wilkerson explains how the making of the book continued after the exhaustive search for the perfect stories. Then came the "distillation of those oral histories into a narrative of three protagonists," and finally, "an examination of newspaper accounts and scholarly and literary works of the era," both historic and contemporary. In the spirit of transparency, or perhaps in an effort to establish her authority of the topic, Wilkerson included the length of the interviews – often dozens, usually hundreds of hours – and that she visited the places of origin of her main characters for interviews with locals.

Wilkerson herself travelled all or part of the migration route of the three main characters. If the goal of the methodology is to establish trust with readers, she furthered those efforts by asserting her personal link to the story through the use of a subjective first-person experience – even within the methodology section. She sought to re-create a grueling car ride across the American southwest – with her parents, themselves members of the Great Migration – taken by one of her characters who was unable to find a motel that would allow him to stay the night. Wilkerson shares the moment with her parents:

"You know he must have been ready to cry right about in here," my mother said as the car I had rented, a new Buick as was his when he made the crossing, hurtled into hairpin curves in total darkness with hundreds of miles to go. As it turned out, I was not able to reenact to the letter one of the most painful aspects of the drive. I was nearly ready to fall asleep at the wheel by the time we reached Yuma, Arizona. My parents insisted that we stop. We got a hotel room, of course, with no trouble at all..." (2010 p. 540)

In this moment and others, Wilkerson provides the reader with an entirely subjective experience of human flight in the face of persecution and demonstrates Wilkerson's attempt to make the Great Migration personal for her readers. These moments can be viewed as a nod to audience expectations and anxieties in an age far different from Hersey's. While Hersey sought to have *Hiroshima* accepted as "the real" because of its clinical portrayal of details, Wilkerson seeks to deliver truth through an acknowledgment of her own subjectivity as well as through a

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demonstration of her methodology. This comparison highlights a shift from conventional journalism toward meta-journalism; in other words, that the storytelling and newsgathering process is shifting away from black-box objectivity and toward historical and factual rigor, combined with a personal subjective authority and methodological transparency. What was accepted as “real” from Hersey was not the same as what was accepted as “real” from Wilkerson.

The flexible use of objectivity and the movement toward a more engaged authorial subjectivity in *Hiroshima* and *The Warmth of Other Suns* might signal a larger shift occurring in journalism at large. Hersey’s use of objectivity—achieved by evacuating his own subjectivity from the piece—reflected the rationalistic, scientific vision of his age. Wilkerson’s embedded subjectivity—what one might call methodological subjectivity or evidentiary subjectivity—dovetails with an increased emphasis on the personal in the Internet age, in which the voices of masses have been unleashed across media platforms, lending new importance and credence to the importance of subjective experiences.

At the same time, those voices are empowered to create journalism thanks to enabling technology, such as blogs and social media. The cultural shifts and technological shifts that enable flexible news creation may be requiring journalists who employ narrative structure to identify their own subjective positions to establish their credibility. Wilkerson shows it is not enough to simply give audiences the story; she provides the story behind the story. By revealing her motives and connection to the piece as well as how the journalism was made, she invites and trusts audiences to make their own assessments. Perhaps that sort of compact with the reader is needed in an era of growing audience disenchantment with journalism. Critic and journalist James Fallows (1996) opens his book, *Breaking the News*, with this candid assessment: The public’s “disdain for the media establishment has reached new levels” (p. 3). There are any number of reasons, including the rise of bloggers; the advent of meta journalism; crowd sourcing that has blurred the line between audiences and reporters; the victory of pundits over reporters, a renaissance of overtly partisan media; the legacy of defrocked journalists Stephen Glass and Jayson Blair, as well as the scandal-stained books *A Million Little Pieces* by James Frey and *Three Cups of Tea* by Greg Mortenson. Through *Warmth*, Wilkerson suggests that while journalists must speak the truth, they can speak only one of several truths, and then they have to back it up.

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