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The Orgy Next Door: An Exploration of Ethical Relationships in Gay Talese's *Thy Neighbor's Wife* and *The Voyeur's Motel*

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Abstract: Gay Talese, credited as the founder of the New Journalism by Tom Wolfe, has long been revered among literary journalists and cited as an exemplar of the long-haul investigation, “the Art of Hanging Around,” where the writer immerses him- or herself into the lives of the subjects. However, in 2016 his reputation and methods came under public scrutiny when media reports revealed that the subject of his new work of immersive journalism, *The Voyeur's Motel*, had falsified his testimony. As critics questioned Talese's suspension of critical judgment, doubt was also cast on his lack of appropriate research methods and clear ethical guidelines. This article explores concerns about theories and methods that literary journalists and ethnographers share as they affect the relationship between the researcher and the subject, the impact of the researcher on the community or individuals studied, and how conflicting loyalties may mitigate against wider ethical considerations. These concerns include a questioning of the limits a literary journalist must place on personal professional behavior, notably sexual experiences or the observation of sexual practices, when using such encounters to provide a vicarious experience for the reader. These issues are investigated through a critical analysis of Talese's two works that take sexuality as their subject matter, *The Voyeur's Motel* (2016) and *Thy Neighbor's Wife* (1980). This essay offers insight for contemporary literary journalism in considering the balance between loyalty to the reader and to the investigated subject, the test of genuine public interest and the writer's personal agenda, and the need for self-awareness.

Keywords: Gay Talese — immersive journalism — ethnographic journalism —
journalistic ethics — *Thy Neighbor's Wife* — *The Voyeur's Motel* — narrating sexual
stories

In the summer of 2016, Gay Talese, who has been credited by Tom Wolfe as the founder of the New Journalism,¹ appeared at the center of a controversy. The author of fourteen books, including such literary journalism classics as *The Kingdom and the Power* (1969), *Honor Thy Father* (1971), *Thy Neighbor's Wife* (1980), and the magazine article some consider to be the best ever, “Frank Sinatra Has a Cold” (*Esquire*, April 1966), Talese’s reputation had a long way to fall. Novelist Mario Puzo declared him “the best nonfiction writer in America,”² Barbara Lounsberry called him “a reporter’s reporter who is revered by fellow writers,”³ and Robert Boynton declared him the “poet of the commonplace” who has demonstrated “that one could write great literary nonfiction about the ‘ordinary.’”⁴ Lad Tobin has praised Talese’s approach to his deeply investigated subjects, which involve “an industriousness and integrity too often missing in the work of the new generation of writers of creative nonfiction.”⁵ In particular, Talese has been cited as an exemplar of the long-haul investigation, “the Art of Hanging Around,”⁶ where the writer immerses him- or herself into the lives of subjects.

All of Talese’s lauded journalistic accomplishments, however, were called into question over his latest investigative work, *The Voyeur's Motel*, published in 2016. Based on the journals of the self-confessed voyeur of the title,⁷ the book claimed to chronicle Gerald Foos’s observations of copulating couples from a viewing platform in the Aurora, Colorado, motel that he purported to own from 1965 to 1995. Foos also recorded witnessing criminal behavior: domestic abuse, drug dealing, an episode of incest, and even a murder. A long extract appeared in the *New Yorker* in April 2016,⁸ attracting widespread media attention, with producer-director Steven Spielberg purchasing the film rights, and a planned national book tour.

However, a *Washington Post* investigation, conducted shortly after the *New Yorker* article appeared, revealed major discrepancies between events in *The Voyeur's Motel* and information found in public records. Foos had, in fact, sold the Colorado motel in 1980 and only reacquired it eight years later. The *Post* also uncovered that the murder Foos recorded in his journal bore a striking resemblance to the unsolved case of Irene Cruz, who was murdered in November 1977, not in Foos's motel but in a Denver hotel.⁹ These inconsistencies cast doubt on Foos as a narrator even though Talese had, in part, verified his claims by joining him on the viewing platform during a research trip to the motel in January 1980. Confronted with these discrepancies, Talese told the *Post*, "I should not have believed a word he said," adding that he would not promote the book because its "credibility was down the toilet."¹⁰ However, Talese quickly retracted his public regret in a statement from his publisher: "I am not disavowing the book, and neither is my publisher," it read. "If, down the line, there are details to correct in later editions, we'll do that."¹¹

Aside from the factual inaccuracies in the book, criticism also focused on concerns about the ethics of including Foos's observations of the couples without their consent.¹² If Talese, this exemplar of the form—whose books belong to the canon of literary journalism—admits to the fallibility of his methods, questions may then arise about what we can learn from his mistakes. Inevitably, further questions arise about the enduring value of his previous works. Even the method, the "fine art of hanging out," might be called into question. Or perhaps Talese, for once, had merely let down his guard and provided valuable insight into his approach.

Reviewers had raised similar questions in 1981 about the narrative reliability and lack of ethical boundaries in Talese's research and writing of *Thy Neighbor's Wife*,¹³ a social history of America's sexual revolution. In an epilogue to this 512-page volume, Talese admitted both to having sexual relationships with female subjects interviewed during his investigation and to managing a Manhattan massage parlor. Fellow journalists, authors, and feminists were excoriating in their comments. Talese said of the experience, "I was made to feel like I was an essentially wicked, perverted person. . . . It was my version of a scarlet letter."¹⁴ However,

despite this critical lambasting of his process and its final product, Talese returned to the subject of sexual practice in *The Voyeur's Motel*. Here he included the journals in which Foos recorded his own voyeuristic experiences, some of which Talese had originally considered including in *Thy Neighbor's Wife*. While Talese questions his reactions to the material throughout the 2016 book, even pondering his own voyeurism in *Thy Neighbor's Wife*, he proceeded to publish descriptions of the couples, without their knowledge, and whose consent could have been sought because Foos possessed their real names and addresses. Another concern was whether Talese had been complicit in Foos's crimes, not only by failing to report them but by providing the voyeur with a media platform and thereby escalating his compulsive behavior.¹⁵ While *Thy Neighbor's Wife* was a much longer, more considered—albeit problematic—book, Talese's 2016 *The Voyeur's Motel*, while a complement in subject, fails the test of being in the public interest. Moreover, both may have caused harm to the investigated subjects.

There are lessons here for literary journalists and scholars of literary journalism interested in the practices and ethics of immersion. Broadly, they are issues related to the necessity for a journalist to consider the impact that a journalist's status and behavior may have on the subjects of investigation. If the journalist is not transparent about how his or her very presence frames the relationship to the group or individuals studied, the result may be an unreliable text. If the motives are falsified, the testimony may become manipulative and the resulting narrative may fail that of public interest. Both *Thy Neighbor's Wife* and *The Voyeur's Motel* faced fierce criticism that, I will argue, was rooted in a perception that these problems were inadequately addressed. Before turning to the details of these two volumes, however, it is instructive to examine how journalists describe their practice and how immersion reporting relates to the field of classical or traditional ethnography, a form of social science research

that explicitly draws upon journalistic practice but with its own shared, ethical consensus.

Immersive Journalism

Walt Harrington describes journalists as the “junkyard dogs of ethnography,” and while the suspicion may be mutual, these respective practices share many characteristics,¹⁶ and a history. Robert Parks, the former journalist turned sociologist, employed journalistic techniques to develop his pioneering center for participant/observer-based fieldwork at the University of Chicago.¹⁷ The traditional approach to ethnography that grew out of this hybrid tradition is defined as “a practice in which researchers spend long periods living within a culture in order to study it.”¹⁸ Journalists who employ immersive techniques also involve themselves in the on-location lives and events of their subjects. Wolfe identified this emerging trend in 1973, of which Talese was the exemplar, where writers provided their readers with a “full objective description” but added details about “the subjective or emotional life of the characters.”¹⁹ According to Sims, writing a decade later, the immersive process “begins with emotional connection” and “in its simplest form, [it] means time spent on the job,” “trying to learn all [you can] about a subject” and is “the journalism of everyday life.”²⁰ The method includes the writer living with his or her subjects, letting the action unfold naturally, collecting material through the observation of sensory details, recording overheard dialogue and watching for small events and details that evoke their stories’ themes.²¹ However, despite the intimacy of the experience, according to Hull, the journalist must “minimize your presence,” remembering that “you are not one of them,” “you are ever the infidel” who must preserve the need to “check people out.”²²

In acknowledging these shared principles, new hybrid terms were developed, such as “ethnographic journalism,”²³ “anthro-journalism,”²⁴ “literary documentary journalism,”²⁵ and “cultural journalism.”²⁶ Hermann argues for the seemingly inherent relationship between long-form literary reportage and public ethnography, with journalists employing social-

scientific immersion strategies and, in the process, remodelling journalism's epistemic norms.²⁷ Boyer, however, notes that while journalists and ethnographers share many characteristics, they operate under different institutional and temporal conditions that influence their working practice.²⁸

Although literary journalists' reflections on their approach are insightful, the development of an agreed set of ethics to accompany this practice is more elusive. As Sims has argued, writers in this genre "follow their own set of rules"²⁹ to produce long-form narratives that focus on their specific experiences and encounters with subjects. Meanwhile, Hemley and others, while acknowledging the individual aspect of this practice, argue that the immersive writer must still pass the test of public interest in making decisions about his or her process and in gauging its potential consequences for subjects upon publication.³⁰ Underpinning the public interest justification is an understanding that the journalist's primary responsibility is to the reader, and to the author's employer, rather than to the investigated subject. This is a crucial distinction, as ethnographers (who normally remain anonymous in their research reports) employ similar practices but define their responsibility as primarily to their subjects, which, in turn, justifies the intimacy of their access. This creates a complex set of decisions, as journalists may regard their loyalties as split, especially where subjects make themselves vulnerable through disclosure, through actions witnessed by the journalist, or through their interactions with them.

Another critical difference arises from the role of the narrator, or narrative voice. The journalist searches for meaning on the reader's behalf, through what is experienced, and therefore operates as a "stand-in for the countless souls whose everyday existence she is investigating."³¹ The writer's access to the subject is usually contingent, temporary, and circumscribed by being insulated from the consequences of publication. The journalist relies on scenic description rather than the "thick description" of the ethnographer, leaving the readers to draw their own conclusions rather than continuously probing for meaning.³² Instead of representing the views of a given group or community, journalists aim to accurately report on what they have heard and seen.

Throughout an immersive journalistic investigation, a writer will attempt to preserve a formal distance (Hull's notion of remaining "ever the infidel") in order to construct the narrative. In this scenario the writer must become separate from the subject in order to view the experience for the consumption of the imagined reader. Hermann challenges this assumption of distance, however, arguing that the journalist in the field "cannot remain a detached observer and narrator, but must become an immersed partaker."³³ The hybrid of "ethnographic reporters" inevitably transcends "not only professional conventions and reporting habits but also their own demographic profiles" by "exchanging the traditional skeptical attitude with an empathetic one."³⁴ This may feed the sense of divided loyalties for journalists left to patrol their own ethical boundaries. According to Harrington:

When you add the word literary to journalism or documentary or ethnography, you cross a line.

You are no longer attempting only to describe other people's experiences. You are now taking responsibility for describing them through your own sense of those other people's experiences.

The egoist in us emerges because we now take pride in the way we tell a story, in the cleverness of our inquiry, the uniqueness of our insight.³⁵

Harrington articulates perfectly the tensions inherent in a participatory investigation where journalists must balance a respect for their subjects' vulnerabilities while retaining control over the final copy: the journalists' version of what they witnessed, how they have understood it, and what it means. As writers grapple with these questions, they must also ask whether their presence, like that of an ethnographer, has changed the story itself.

Talese reflects on his process of immersion in his essay, "Origins of a Nonfiction Writer."³⁶ Here he describes how a childhood spent observing his mother's exchanges with her female customers at her dress boutique in Ocean City, New Jersey, provided the impetus for his journalistic career. The shop was "a kind of talk show," he writes, where his mother's "engaging manner and well-timed questions" drew out intimate confessions from her clients. Talese "used to pause and eavesdrop . . . to listen with patience and care, and never to interrupt," techniques which he later parlayed into interviews.³⁷ His mother also exemplified the "trustworthy individual" in whom her customers could confide. Taking this exchange as

his model, Talese writes that he is motivated by his curiosity about “‘ordinary’ people” and analyzes their behavior through the lens of “a small-town American outsider whose exploratory view of the world is accompanied by the essence of the people and place I left behind.”³⁸ Immersion, for Talese, involves both a considerable amount of time and the writer’s physical presence. “I also believe people will reveal more of themselves to you if you are physically present; and the more sincere you are in your interest, the better will be your chances of obtaining that person’s cooperation.”³⁹ Once consent is obtained and subjects agree to have their real names used, Talese is free to describe a group or individual’s behavior through his own idiosyncratic perspective rather than as a representative of the subject or group.

Turning to the two books in question, there are several examples where Talese’s description of his immersive process seems to contradict his subjects’ experience of it. Their critical responses reveal challenges inherent to the immersive process for a journalist with Talese’s high public profile, and to his apparent lack of transparency about his approach to research and reporting. As a celebrity journalist Talese was an asset to the Sandstone community, a ‘growth centre’ in Topanga Canyon, California, which he visited in 1973 while researching *Thy Neighbor’s Wife* and whose managers were hoping to boost their membership.⁴⁰ In the case of Gerald Foos, the voyeur’s desire to access the vast readership that a writing collaboration with Talese would offer may have driven him to falsify his journal entries. In these cases, the ambiguous nature of the relationships Talese fostered with his subjects raises questions about what he actually observed and his motives for observing it. Criticism, expressed in the form of contemporary reviews and critical articles, also suggests that the lack of self-reflection and transparency about his methods may have led readers to question his reliability as a narrator and to cast the process of immersive journalism into doubt.

***Thy Neighbor’s Wife* (1981)**

At the time *Thy Neighbor's Wife* was published, Talese enjoyed an enviable public profile among Manhattan's literary elite, both as a writer and as the husband of Nan Talese, one of New York's most powerful publishers.⁴¹ A trawl through issues of the *New York Times* of 1980 shows him mentioned in gossip columns, quoted in articles and endorsing books in publishers' ads, and by 1981 even reported as appearing as the aptly-named "sexual adventurer" in Gary Trudeau's "Doonesbury" comic strip.⁴² His financial ranking was also newsworthy. Following *The Kingdom and the Power* (1969), his "human history"⁴³ of the *New York Times* and his expose of a New York mafia family in *Honor Thy Father* (1971), Talese's publisher Doubleday paid him a \$1.2 million advance for a two-book deal, of which *Thy Neighbor's Wife* was the first. In October 1979, United Artists offered Talese the then-record sum of \$2.5 million for film rights to the book.⁴⁴

Expected to be what Clarence Petersen of the *Chicago Tribune* called, "the most controversial book of the year, and one of the most provocative books about sex since the first Kinsey report,"⁴⁵ it was also, Peterson reported Talese as saying, "the most important story I've ever written."⁴⁶ The author, however, seemed unprepared for an onslaught of negative reviews, including Peterson's reports of John Yardley's description of it in the *Washington Star* as "a genuinely dreadful book" and "a slimy exercise,"⁴⁷ and, in the *New Republic*, Barbara Grizzuti Harrison's dismissing it as "boring . . . pious and self-righteous."⁴⁸ Harrison's sentiment was echoed by novelist Mordecai Richler: "*Thy Neighbor's Wife* is an impoverished book; it succeeds like no other I know of in making of sex a mechanical bore."⁴⁹ It was as deep as a "skin-flick," according to Joan Beck in the *Chicago Tribune*.⁵⁰ And in the *Washington Post*, Robert Sherrill decried it as "constructed mostly from the sort of intellectual plywood you find in most neighborhood bars: part voyeurism, part amateur psychoanalysis, part six-pack philosophy."⁵¹ Aside from their misgivings about the book's literary qualities, some critics thought the subject, borne of the counterculture, by 1980 had arrived too late for serious consideration.⁵² The critics' objections to the book's potted social history, however, were mild in comparison to their comments about Talese's revelation that he had enjoyed sexual encounters at the nudist Sandstone Retreat in Topanga Canyon. For

several chapters in *Thy Neighbor's Wife* he describes a nirvana where ordinary middle-class couples experimented with unconventional (and largely heterosexual) relationships.⁵³ There are graphic descriptions in *Thy Neighbor's Wife* of orgies, and of couplings, that reveal the subjects at their most publicly uninhibited. This theme of “freedom” runs throughout the book with many characters described as having escaped from puritanical parents and restricted childhoods, from poverty and from oppressive ideologies. Sex operates as a form of rebellion against orthodoxy, against restrictions and religious control, while the Sandstone residents seek enlightenment through new philosophies, such as Abraham Maslow’s concept of self-actualization.⁵⁴

Given the sensitivity of the investigation, Talese explains his approach in an author’s note at the end of *Thy Neighbor's Wife*. He describes how he conducted hundreds of interviews, with some subjects more than fifty times, and established “such trusting relationships with the interviewees that they would allow the use of their names in connection with the intimate stories they told me about themselves.”⁵⁵ Talese assured his subjects that their stories would be relayed accurately and in “the same nonjudgemental tone that characterized my previous work.”⁵⁶ Despite this neutral tone, Talese discloses only in a final chapter,⁵⁷ in which he writes about himself in the third person, that he engaged in a sexual relationship with Sandstone’s cofounder Barbara Williamson. By concluding, rather than opening the book with this admission, Talese obfuscates the reality of his role in the story and his methods for obtaining information about his subjects. The book is, quite simply, read differently without this knowledge.

The descriptions of the residents’ sexual libertinism are written in a tone of detached interest that enables Talese to maintain his “small-town American outsider perspective.”⁵⁸ In this passage, he gives an eye-witness account of the basement “ball-room,” the regular Saturday night party where residents, and guests, were granted entry to a pleasure-seeker’s parlor”:

There were triads, foursomes, a few bisexuals: bodies that could belong to high-fashion models, linebackers, Wagnerian sopranos, speed swimmers, flabby academicians; tattooed arms, peace

beads, ankle bracelets, ankhs, thin gold chains around waists, hefty penises, noodles, curly female pubes, fine, bushy, trimmed, dark, blond, red valentines. . . . Everything that Puritan America had ever tried to outlaw, to censor, to conceal behind locked bedroom doors, was on display in this adult playroom, where men often saw for the first time another man's erection, and where many couples became alternately stimulated, shocked, gladdened, or saddened by the sight of their spouse interlocked with a new lover.⁵⁹

On the floor above the "ball-room," prominent literary and counterculture guests gathered, ranging from the psychologists Phyllis and Eberhard Kronhausen, to *New York Post* columnist Max Lerner, actor Bernie Casey and the former Rand Corporation employees responsible for the Pentagon Papers, Daniel Ellsberg and Anthony Russo.⁶⁰ Cofounder John Williamson's vision for the community's eventual membership was a "cross-section of upper-income California businessmen, artists, actors, doctors, lawyers, engineers, and people with a creative drive."⁶¹ According to Barbara Williamson's records, only five percent of Sandstone's membership was "blue-collar" and ninety percent "upper-middle class."⁶² This suggests, along with Talese's list of prominent guests, that far from offering an outlet for "ordinary" people—the neighbors of the book's title⁶³—Sandstone's real aim was to attract those with high status and money.

Talese arrived at the community as a "big-shot very prominent journalist" Williamson hoped would publicize their cause and continue to attract an elite membership.⁶⁴ After Talese's initial visit in 1974, he provided Sandstone with national television coverage by promoting its lifestyle on Johnny Carson's *The Tonight Show*. He later appeared at a public event for Sandstone, along with the author of *The Joy of Sex* (1972), Dr. Alex Comfort, *Playboy* magazine's managing editor Nat Lehrman, and *Screw* magazine publisher Al Goldstein.⁶⁵ Talese gave numerous radio and print interviews about Sandstone, most notably to Aaron Latham for *New York Magazine*:

Sandstone had institutionalized the orgy so that it was always there when you needed it. Sandstone stood as a monument to prostate power. Many of the openly copulating residents practiced the reverse of fidelity: they were strict about not making love to anyone to whom they had made love

to before . . . Gay told a reporter for *Coast* magazine, “I’m not that young anymore, and lately the most I’ve been doing is about once a day. But I’ve been engaged at least four times a day since I’ve been here. After a hundred times, it gets a little wearing.”⁶⁶

Although Talese indulged his sexual fantasies on his first visit, when he returned for a longer research period he was committed to becoming “part of the family.”⁶⁷ But his refusal to share domestic tasks such as cooking and cleaning set him apart from the group and reinforced his celebrity status. Hatfield claims the writer spent his days playing tennis, interested only in interviewing the Williamsons and participating in the Saturday night parties where “he took women into his own bedroom,” violating the community’s rules.⁶⁸

Williamson realized that Talese was struggling to establish a rapport with the other residents and describes him as someone “used to getting his own way” and sulking because the other residents refused to speak with him. To remedy the situation, Williamson describes in her memoir how she visited his cabin one afternoon. In Talese’s version, Williamson was “a sexually aggressive woman” who demanded his sexual favors in return for an interview.⁶⁹ “After she had finished, *and only after she had finished* [italics in original], Barbara Williamson began to talk freely, confiding in him for the first time since he had arrived at Sandstone . . .”⁷⁰ Thus he appears to justify his sexual experience as an extension of his journalistic method, an argument he continued to make in 2009 following the republication of *Thy Neighbor’s Wife*. As he explained to Katie Roiphe (who wrote the preface for the new edition) in an interview for the *Paris Review*:

I also wanted to emphasize [in the final chapter of *Thy Neighbor’s Wife*] my distance from the events surrounding me, even when I was within them. I might be in a sauna, but I’m also apart from that sauna. I’m always thinking what it looks like from across the street, or I’m eavesdropping on other conversations. As a reporter I disassociate. It seemed the most obvious way to put myself into the book. I am an observer at all times.⁷¹

Williamson, however, contradicts Talese’s account, claiming she initiated sex to soothe Talese’s “crushed ego” and that her seduction was calculated to salvage his pride. She led him to the bedroom saying, “Come on, let’s get you better.”⁷² Their physical exchange also casts

doubt on Talese's insistence that he remained an ever-vigilant observer, an idea that ignores what Plummer describes as "the complex social processes" involved in the telling of sexual stories.⁷³

In the Roiphe interview, Talese, reflecting on Sandstone, justified shedding his clothes and engaging in sex as a means to establish trust with his subjects. "The point is that they had to trust me and I had to trust them. I couldn't have done it any other way."⁷⁴ But Talese struggled to establish a rapport with John Williamson, partly by insisting on interviewing him at a Malibu Beach restaurant rather than at Sandstone, a demand the Williamsons perceived as a "power play."⁷⁵ Since John Williamson was such a key figure, Talese asked Cynthia Sears, "a well-respected female writer" to conduct the interview. Barbara Williamson noticed a marked difference in their styles. "[Sears's] whole approach was a radical departure from Gay's journalistic sense of propriety, his macho pushiness, and John's response was instantly positive. . . . Throughout the entire interview, Gay wore an expression of disbelief."⁷⁶ Sears is credited in Talese's book only as his "research associate" who "tape recorded my conversations" with the Williamsons and "carefully transcribed these dialogues that gave me an additional record so that I could play back and hear again what was said about events and emotions involved."⁷⁷ Barbara recalls that other members found Talese's interviewing style "overly aggressive, pushy,"⁷⁸ which suggests that despite the months living in the community Talese had failed to establish the trust vital to an immersive investigation.

Another contrast between Talese's articulation of his method and his subject's experience of it arises in considering his attitude towards the female residents. In *Thy Neighbor's Wife*, he claims that the Saturday night parties provided women with a safe space in which they could experiment sexually. As he describes the scene:

There was no need for coquetry or traditional feminine coyness at Sandstone, no thoughts about one's "reputation" nor the legitimate concerns that most women had about their physical safety whenever conversing with male strangers in bars or other public places . . . women were protected by those around them from being victim of one man's hostility.⁷⁹

However, while Williamson shared Talese's conviction that the orgies were liberating for women, she resented the way he rejected any lover who became emotionally attached and his tendency "to treat women as objects, denying them their full expression as individuals."⁸⁰ One woman commented, "he treats women like paper towels: tear one off, use it and throw it away."⁸¹ Hatfield even remembers a female guest making a rape allegation against "an honorary member," with Talese as the prime suspect and who, when confronted, "became very angry and accused me [Hatfield] of "power tripping."⁸²

Talese's lack of clarity about the extent to which he engaged in sexual relationships seems an important oversight in the construction of this narrative. Had he used the first person throughout the Sandstone chapters, the reader would have been alerted to the highly subjective mode in which he was writing and this, in itself, would have offered greater insight into his stated objectives. By including only a highly edited version of his experience and leaving this crucial information to a final chapter, he obscures and distorts the story. The narrator's reliability is cast into even further doubt when the Sandstone residents' memoirs are considered. Talese's high-profile status and volatile temper also appear to complicate his role as a "part of the family,"⁸³ raising doubts about his acceptance by and his ability to understand, meaningfully, the community and its individual members.

The Voyeur's Motel (2016)

Despite the opprobrium heaped upon Talese for *Thy Neighbor's Wife*, it became a bestseller and was the topic of television and radio talk shows across the country. Talese's experiment with inserting himself into the text prompted him to employ this technique in a memoir about his Italian heritage, *Unto the Sons*, published in 1992. In his essay, "Origins of a Nonfiction Writer," he writes that the memoir enabled him "to expose . . . myself and my past influences, without changing the names of the people or the place that shaped my character."⁸⁴ His turn to a deeply personal story anticipated the memoir boom, which, by the early twenty-first century, saw "more than 150,000 new titles [released] every year."⁸⁵ In keeping with the trend

towards a first-person narrative, where the writer provides greater transparency about his or her methods, Talese, in his most recent book, offers more detail about his practice, writes in the first person, and is reflective throughout. Because Foos originally contracted Talese as a possible subject for *Thy Neighbor's Wife*, it might be regarded as a companion volume that deals with the same intimate subject matter. If these rhetorical devices address the concerns voiced by past critics of *Thy Neighbor's Wife*, they fail, however, to satisfy fully a fresh set of ethical concerns.

Meeting the Voyeur

Voyeurism was not a novel theme for Talese. He made reference to it in *Thy Neighbor's Wife*, summing up his observations of how the different genders consume sex, in Europe and in the United States: "Men were natural voyeurs; women were exhibitors. Women sold sexual pleasure; men bought it."⁸⁶ In *The Voyeur's Motel* he compares his journalistic motives and methods in *Thy Neighbor's Wife* to those of the voyeur, making the distinction that "the people I observed and reported on had given me their consent."⁸⁷ He makes a comparison, perhaps unconscious, in "Origins of a Nonfiction Writer," where he describes himself as "overhear[ing] many people discussing candidly with my mother what they had earlier avoided" in the dress shop, another form of observant watching that is central to his evolving identity as a journalist.⁸⁸

With the link between voyeurism and journalistic investigation firmly established at the outset of the book, Talese describes how, after receiving a letter from Foos, he agrees to meet him in Denver on January 23, 1980, as a possible subject for *Thy Neighbor's Wife*.⁸⁹ Here Talese describes how he translates his curiosity about—and reactions to—a subject into prose. After their first meeting, Talese writes up his daily impressions about his encounters, a long-established practice.⁹⁰ He provides a detailed physical description of Foos, his mannerisms, and his character, even though Talese wonders, "What could I see in his attic that I had not already seen as the researching writer of *Thy Neighbor's Wife* and a frequenter of Sandstone's swinging couples' ballroom?"⁹¹

Just as Talese is present as a first-person narrator, describing his investigation techniques in detail, he is also self-reflective about his process and his relationship with Foos. There are several examples where he contemplates the ethics of publishing Foos's observations of his guests from the platform in his motel, justified by Talese as his subject "indulging his curiosity within the boundaries of his own property, and since his guests were unaware of his voyeurism, they were not affected by it . . . there's no violation of privacy if no one complains."⁹² As if emboldened by this justification, Talese joins Foos on the viewing platform (and returns "a number of additional times"), where he observes couples engaged in sex.⁹³ Talese here admits that this activity is "very illegal" and wonders about his own complicity "in this strange and distasteful project." He eventually decides that because Foos would have to remain anonymous, he cannot use this material⁹⁴ and returns to New York to begin his promotional tour for *Thy Neighbor's Wife*.

Between 1980 and 1995, when the motel was sold, Foos sent Talese his journals that documented, in great detail, years of his surreptitious recordings from his attic platform. Over that period, Foos became increasingly frustrated with his inability to share his findings—he compared himself to professional sexologists such as Kinsey, and Masters and Johnson—while his fantasies, and behavior, became more florid. For example, he performed an "experiment" where he planted sexual paraphernalia and pornography in a motel room and recorded whether his "subjects" used them.⁹⁵ He also describes occasions when he followed female "subjects" back to their homes, even making inquiries about one from a neighbor.⁹⁶ Reading this material, in New York, at a geographical and psychological distance, Talese wonders if "voyeurs sometimes need escape from prolonged solitude by exposing themselves to other people (as Foos had done first with his wife, and later me), and then seek a larger audience as an anonymous scrivener of what they've witnessed?"⁹⁷ This statement seems to raise the question of Talese's role in aiding Foos's criminal behavior. The possibility exists that a celebrated writer who considered publishing his accounts—which would satisfy the voyeur's stated desire for "a larger audience"—may have driven Foos to take greater risks with his "subjects."⁹⁸

Critics of *The Voyeur's Motel* argued that the author had, indeed, violated journalistic ethics in his treatment of Foos. Dick Lehr, writing in the *Huffington Post*, in response to the Foos controversy, suggests that while Talese was correct in his refusal to notify the authorities about violations of privacy, the book fails the test of public interest. "Promises reporters make to sources are a very big deal," Lehr writes "It's a matter of trust, a promise so sacrosanct that many reporters would only consider breaking it in the rarest of exceptions."⁹⁹ But, he continues, concerns for the violation of the couples' privacy should have taken precedence over Talese's loyalty to his informant. For Lehr, the more troubling aspect of the book is why Talese, who makes repeated references to Foos's unreliability, chose to believe him.¹⁰⁰

The second ethical issue arises over whether Talese, as the voyeur's constant reader and who holds the promise of an international readership for his "research," encouraged his criminal behavior. Kim Walsh-Childers argues that by respecting their confidentiality agreement, Talese allows Foos to subject hundreds, even thousands more guests to his voyeurism, judgment, and scorn. Their years of correspondence affirmed Foos's behavior, "helping him maintain the myth that his actions served some higher purpose, some noble societal goal, rather than simply satisfying his own sexual desire."¹⁰¹ More disturbing is the possibility that, through Foos's reference to his increasing frustrations and references to experiments with his guests in which their privacy is further violated—the sexual paraphernalia planted in their rooms, the stalking of female guests—that his activities escalate. Voyeurism, according to psychologists, is rarely a discrete clinical entity: many studies have found that perpetrators of voyeurism also engage in other forms of sexual deviance, including rape, paedophilia, exhibitionism, and sadism.¹⁰² Earl Ballard, who purchased the Manor House Motel from Foos in 1980, raised this possibility. He told the *National Post* that during the 1970s Foos invited him and another man to join him "multiple times" in the annex to look in on guests.¹⁰³ This seems consistent with psychologists' descriptions of voyeurs as suffering "a general deficit of control over deviant sexual

behavior”¹⁰⁴ and contradicts Talese’s image of Foos as suffering from periods of “prolonged solitude.”¹⁰⁵

Not all of the commentators on the controversy surrounding *The Voyeur’s Motel*, however, agreed that it cast doubt on the genre and practice of New Journalism. David L. Ullin, writing in the *Los Angeles Times*, argues that Talese probably relied too heavily on Foos as a narrator simply because of the author’s “desire to believe” this “too good not to tell” story.¹⁰⁶ Ladd Tobin, writing more broadly about Talese’s methods in his *Esquire* article, “Frank Sinatra Has a Cold,” also concludes that, however conscious, the author’s fascination and identification with his subject is a primary framing device.¹⁰⁷ I would argue that Talese’s references to his own voyeurism—as a boy in his mother’s shop, as a journalist at Sandstone, with Foos in the motel—“[seep] into almost everything he sees and says” in the book.¹⁰⁸ Ullin’s view that Talese is motivated by a desire to relay Foos’s “too good not to tell” story ignores what Tobin uncovers: that the author’s unconscious, over-identification with his subject causes him to suspend his critical judgment. Moreover, Talese’s unresolved and conflicted feelings about his own sexual desires are played out in *Thy Neighbor’s Wife*, another case where his ability to maintain distance—and judgment—collapses.

Conclusion

Tobin’s observations are especially helpful in considering the broader lessons to be learned from Talese’s immersive techniques in writing about his own, and others’, sexual experiences. *Thy Neighbor’s Wife* and *The Voyeur’s Motel* appeared to be vehicles for the writer to work out his own obsessions, thereby “telling us as much about himself as he does about his subjects.”¹⁰⁹ However, if immersive journalism is a practice in which the writer may strip him- or herself bare, then this must be done with brutal honesty; otherwise, the text becomes manipulative and the truth claim with the reader is broken. Talese, I have argued, disappoints by failing to appropriately frame his Sandstone chapters in *Thy Neighbor’s Wife* as the experience of a celebrity whose presence colors his intimate relationships with his

subjects. The confessional author note, left to the final chapter and written in a distancing third person, seems self-serving and casts doubt on the book's message.

Talese's self-reflective mode in *The Voyeur's Motel*, however, fails to fully address these concerns. Here the ethical questions are even more sharply focused because of Talese's complicity in the crimes perpetuated by the subject and by the possibility that his attention may have prompted the voyeur's sexually deviant behavior to escalate. The unconscious over-identification with the subject, which goes unacknowledged, seems paradoxical given Talese's stated ability to "dissociation" and to remain ever "the observer."¹¹⁰ Perhaps the most vital message in this exploration of these journalistic investigations into the fraught territory of sexual intimacy is the need for psychological insight and an ability to face up to the brutal honesty of our motivating psyches. As Phillip Lopate has written about the essential requirement for good personal writing, "remorse is often the starting point . . . whose working out brings the necessary self-forgiveness (not to mention self-amusement) that is necessary to help us outgrow shame."¹¹¹ Whatever Talese's motivations that lay behind the years he has devoted to writing about sex, perhaps this self-understanding might have been a better, and more ethical starting place.

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[np.https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/02/books/gay-talese-defends-the-voyeurs-motel.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/02/books/gay-talese-defends-the-voyeurs-motel.html).
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Notes

¹ Wolfe, *The New Journalism*, ed. Wolfe and Johnson, 10–36; see also Talese, "Origins of a Nonfiction Writer (1997)," 171.

² Talese, *Sinatra Has a Cold and Other Essays*, back cover.

³ Lounsberry, introduction to *The Gay Talese Reader*, vii; see also Tobin, "Gay Talese Has a Secret," 139.

⁴ Boynton, "Gay Talese," *The New New Journalism*, para. 2.

⁵ Tobin, "Gay Talese Has a Secret," 138.

⁶ Talese, "Origins of a Nonfiction Writer," 189.

⁷ Talese, *The Voyeur's Motel*, 36.

⁸ Talese, "The Voyeur's Motel," 40–55.

⁹ Farhi, "The Murder the *New Yorker* Never Mentioned,"

¹⁰ Farhi, "Gay Talese Renounces His Lurid New Book about a Motel Voyeur," paras. 2–3.

¹¹ Alter, "Gay Talese Defends 'The Voyeur's Motel'," para. 6,

¹² Lehr, "Can You Ever Break a Confidentiality Agreement?" para 7.

¹³ Talese, *Thy Neighbour's Wife*, 250; the book was first published in the United States as Gay Talese, *Thy Neighbor's Wife* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1980). Citations, including page numbers, are from the UK edition.

¹⁴ Roiphe, "Gay Talese, the Art of Nonfiction, No. 2," 85, 86,

¹⁵ Walsh-Childers, "An Ethical Bind," para 13.

¹⁶ Harrington, "What Journalism Can Offer Ethnography," 90.

¹⁷ Hermann, "Ethnographic Journalism," 261; see also, Lindner, *The Reportage of Urban Culture*.

¹⁸ *Qualitative Research Glossary* of the AQR, s.v. "Ethnography."

¹⁹ Wolfe, *The New Journalism*, ed. Wolfe and Johnson, 35.

²⁰ Sims, "The Literary Journalists," 10, 11.

²¹ Harrington, "What Journalism Can Offer Ethnography," 92–94.

²² Hull, "Being There," 41, 42.

²³ Cramer and McDevitt, "Ethnographic Journalism," 127–43.

²⁴ Fillmore, "Anthro-Journalism."

²⁵ Harrington, "What Journalism Can Offer Ethnography," 92.

²⁶ Bird, "The Journalist as Ethnographer?" 302.

²⁷ Hermann, "Ethnographic Journalism," 261.

²⁸ Boyer, "Divergent Temporalities," 6, 9.

²⁹ Sims, "The Literary Journalists," 3.

³⁰ Hemley, *A Field Guide for Immersion Writing*, 150.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 59.

³² Singer, "Ethnography," 192.

³³ Hermann, "Ethnographic Journalism," 269.

³⁴ Cramer and McDevitt, "Ethnographic Journalism," 131; Hermann, "Ethnographic Journalism," 269.

³⁵ Harrington, "What Journalism Can Offer Ethnography," 102–3.

³⁶ Talese, "Origins of a Nonfiction Writer," 166–96.

³⁷ Talese, "Origins of a Nonfiction Writer," 167–8.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 172, 173.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 194.

⁴⁰ Talese, *Thy Neighbour's Wife*, 250.

⁴¹ Schwartz, "The Worlds of Gay Talese," SM9; Petersen in *The Chicago Tribune* quoted Phillip Nobile as saying of the controversy surrounding *Thy Neighbor's Wife*, "Talese's labor of love has excited hot passions—and why not? The author, already celebrated, has become rich and famous enough to be blurbed by People"; see Petersen, "Sexual Odyssey Over, p. 1 Lifestyle.

⁴² Gay Talese, in a New York Times Books advertisement, endorses Thomas Weyr's nonfiction book, *Reaching for Paradise: The Playboy Vision of America*, Travel Section, n.p.; for celebrity gossip see Klemesrud, "A New Role for Male Models: Restaurateur," A2; for Trudeau reference, Herbert Mitgang, "Aging Agitator," *The New York Times*, July 12, 1981, 39: "Lately, Gay Talese has turned up by name as a "sexual adventurer," and David ("Tome") Halberstam has been described as the author of very fat books."

⁴³ 'human history', quoted in Barbara Lounsberry, 'Bridging the silence: Gay Talese's uncomfortable journey,' *Lit: Literature Interpretation Theory*, 14, no.1 (2003): 37-62, 37.

⁴⁴ Schwartz, "UA Pays \$2.5 Million for Book by Gay Talese," C9.

⁴⁵ Petersen, "Sexual Odyssey Over," 1.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Richler, "Bad Vibrations," 46, 49.

⁵⁰ Beck, "A Skin-Deep Peek," 2.

⁵¹ Sherrill, "Selling Sex in America," NEEDS PAGE OR PARAGRAPH

⁵² For example, see Harvey Mindess, quote in Steven Watts, *Mr. Playboy: Hugh Hefner and the American Dream*, (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley and Sons: 2008) 328, 493.

⁵³ John and Judith Bullaro feature as the typical middle-class couple whose lives are deeply affected by the sexual liberation movement through their involvement with the Sandstone retreat. See Talese, *My Neighbour's Wife*, 123-205. Hatfield noted that rather than your next-door neighbor, as Talese described it, the sexual revolutionaries who made up the

community at Sandstone were regarded by their founders as an elite. The community was “a cross-section of upper-income California businessmen, artists, actors, doctors, lawyers, engineers, and people with a creative drive”; see Hatfield, introduction to *My Sandstone Experience*, 6.

⁵⁴ For insights into Sandstone philosophies, including their interest in Maslow’s work, see Hatfield, *My Sandstone Experience*, 1, 66. and Yardley, “John Williamson, para. 11.

⁵⁵ Talese, *Thy Neighbour’s Wife*, 496.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 496.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ Talese, “Origins of a Nonfiction Writer,” 173.

⁵⁹ Talese, *Thy Neighbour’s Wife*, 315–6.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 314.

⁶¹ Tom Hatfield, introduction to *My Sandstone Experience*, 6.

⁶² Williamson, *An Extraordinary Life*, 104.

⁶³ Petersen, quoting Talese, “Sexual Odyssey Over,” 1.

⁶⁴ Williamson, *An Extraordinary Life*, 50.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 51, 87.

⁶⁶ Latham, “An Evening in the Nude,” 51.

⁶⁷ Hatfield, *My Sandstone Experience*, 97; Robert Rimmer paraphrases Talese from a radio talk show interview with Gay and Marty Zitter, describing his reaction to Sandstone as “like being a kid in a candy store,” quoted in Hatfield, *My Sandstone Experience*, 15.

⁶⁸ Hatfield, *My Sandstone Experience*, 98.

⁶⁹ Talese, *Thy Neighbour’s Wife*, 490. In Hotchner’s profile, “People Are Talking About: Gay Talese, Talese is quoted as asking his dinner guests if they masturbate: “There is some embarrassment, but, with one exception (a woman who maintained it was none of his business), they answer him,” 198.

⁷⁰ Talese, *Thy Neighbour’s Wife*, 490–1.

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- ⁷¹ Roiphe, “Talese, the Art of Nonfiction,” 84.
- ⁷² Williamson, *An Extraordinary Life*, 53.
- ⁷³ Plummer, *Telling Sexual Stories*, 13.
- ⁷⁴ Roiphe, “Talese, the Art of Nonfiction,” 83.
- ⁷⁵ Williamson, *An Extraordinary Life*, 57.
- ⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 58.
- ⁷⁷ Talese, *Thy Neighbour’s Wife*, 496.
- ⁷⁸ Williamson, *An Extraordinary Life*, 58.
- ⁷⁹ Talese, *Thy Neighbour’s Wife*, 319.
- ⁸⁰ Williamson, *An Extraordinary Life*, 54.
- ⁸¹ Hatfield, *My Sandstone Experience*, 99.
- ⁸² *Ibid.*,
- ⁸³ *Ibid.*, 97.
- ⁸⁴ Talese, “Origins of a Nonfiction Writer,” 175.
- ⁸⁵ Rak, *Boom! Manufacturing Memoir*, 8.
- ⁸⁶ Talese, *Thy Neighbour’s Wife*, 481.
- ⁸⁷ Talese, *The Voyeur’s Motel*, 5.
- ⁸⁸ Talese, “Origins of a Nonfiction Writer,” 168.
- ⁸⁹ Talese, *The Voyeur’s Motel*, 8.
- ⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 18.
- ⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 18.
- ⁹² *Ibid.*, 26.
- ⁹³ *Ibid.*, 37.
- ⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 37.
- ⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 92.
- ⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 79, 83.
- ⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 36.

⁹⁸ There is also the question of how Foos benefitted financially from this arrangement.

Foos, at the time of publication of *The Voyeur's Motel*, was selling off his collection of baseball cards and antique dolls. Talese, also a high profile and well-known sports writer, appears in a YouTube video with Foos, overlooking the collection; see Freiermuth, "The Collections of Gerald and Anita Foos." The Youtube video featuring Foos and Talese with his collection is now private;

<https://www.facebook.com/HistoricSportsCollection/posts/365873163565097>. It is, however, mentioned in an article by Chris Walker, 'Gerald Foos, Owner of the Voyeur's Motel, Collected More than Sex Secrets', *Westword*, August 17, 2016, para 37.

<http://www.westword.com/news/gerald-foos-owner-of-the-voyeurs-motel-collected-more-than-sex-secrets-8210009> [accessed August 9, 2017]

⁹⁹ Lehr, "Can You Ever Break a Confidentiality Agreement?" para. 8.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., para. 12.

¹⁰¹ Walsh-Childers, "An Ethical Bind," para. 18.

¹⁰² Adams, "Voyeurism," 8:216–8.

¹⁰³ Farhi, "Motel Voyeur Tales Face 'Credibility' Questions," para 28.

¹⁰⁴ Adams, "Voyeurism," 8:216–8.

¹⁰⁵ Talese, *The Voyeur's Motel*, 36.

¹⁰⁶ Ulin, "All Manner of Goings-On," F9.

¹⁰⁷ Tobin, "Gay Talese Has a Secret," 143–4.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Roiphe, "Talese, the Art of Nonfiction," 84.

¹¹¹ Lopate, *To Show and to Tell*, 25.