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Book review

Isaac Blacksin

Conflicted: Making News from Global War.

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Informing Isaac Blacksin's incisive examination of conflict reportage are insights garnered from years of fieldwork conducting interviews and participant observation, including in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, Afghanistan and Ukraine. This remarkably rich evidential base enables him to explore not only what this type of reportage is, but also what it is not, in several warzones of the post-9/11 era. By attending to what falls both inside and outside of war's representational boundaries, journalistic production is shown to be more than appropriations and affordances. That is, the focus necessarily extends to recognize 'erasures' as well; 'what war reportage displaces – those words not expressed, those meanings not made, those experiences not reported – in order to capture the particularity of war as rendered in the news today' (p.3). In other words, while the perceived authority of journalism for determining how the events of war are named and classified will be always already subject to negotiation, its contingencies will be similarly evident in what 'remains journalistically unexpressed,' including amongst reporters themselves 'in the places they live and socialize' (p.3).

It is not entirely surprising, then, for Blacksin's introductory chapter to begin some distance from the harrowing violence of conflict, namely in the Classy Hotel in Ebril, northern Iraq. Journalists, their local fixers, as well as political and military officials on occasion, converse across the tables of its bar, café and lobby, often exchanging views about the challenges of war reporting confronting them. From this standpoint, 'war reportage can be observed not merely as a profession or a craft,' Blacksin maintains, 'but as a social world unto itself, a world engaged with the uneasy transposition of knowing war into telling war.' As such, the hotel is 'a place where journalism becomes journalism and journalists become journalists,' the investigation of which bringing to the fore routine, inchoate processes of mediation, such as when ideas are shared, 'resources are pooled, logistics plotted, networks enhanced, fears related, values compared, fantasies indulged, limitations realized' (p.2). Crystallizing in the Classy Hotel as a site of sociality and news production, Blacksin argues, is the 'transfiguration of war into news of war,' thereby revealing relations of power implicit to factual claims and normative narratives 'reflected in presence and absence at a hotel bar' (p. 4). In this way, the principal concerns for the ensuing enquiry, namely the language, meaning and practice of war reportage, find initial definition for purposes of elaboration in the discussion to follow.

Building on the Introduction's overview of the book's conceptual and methodological commitments, Chapters One and Two delve into the language of war

reportage and its material conditions of linguistic possibility. More specifically, in the first chapter Blacksin examines news industry 'style manuals' and examples of his interlocutors' reportage, carefully unpacking journalism's narrative realism so as to pinpoint the features of what he terms the 'hegemonic common sense' interwoven in how war is rendered legible in certain preferred, circumspect ways. Case studies inform the second chapter as well, where analysis of two conventions – casualty counting (as indicative of symbolic truth) and the byline (the mark of news authorship) – shows how they underwrite journalism's claim to mediational power and authority. The focus shifts to questions of meaning in Chapters Three and Four, beginning with a case study of the reporting of the 2016-17 battle for Mosul in Iraq. Relative successes and failures are assessed, the latter including the reaffirmation of official rationales justifying discourses of self-defense and pre-emptive force in US military operations without contesting the legitimization of the strategic structures perpetuating violence. The 'humanitarian turn' and associated framings of militarism in wartime journalism are evaluated in the next chapter, a key aim being to trace the historical formation of a still evolving politics of objectivity privileging sanctioned meanings of war over and above contrary, civilian-centered configurations.

In emphasizing the practice of war reportage, the next two chapters serve to elucidate the lived materiality of reportorial imperatives. Chapter Five draws on psychoanalysis to illuminate the persistence of certain prohibitions and repressions endemic to the journalistic encounter with war, not least how the distressful tensions, ambiguities, absurdities, fears, or traumas prevalent in this experience are effectively excised by the generic requirements of an authoritative narrative genre. Further aspects of the 'hidden intimacy' of a 'social fantasy of war' are brought to light in Chapter Six, affording a fresh vantage point to better understand journalists' self-described efforts to bear witness to atrocity, including their struggles to mitigate competing pressures to fulfil audience expectations of what war entails. Blacksin's insightful reading of diverse types of evidence, such as the marginalia found in journalists' notebooks, registers the disconnect between the figuration of witness-bearing and the foreclosing insistences of professional ideals. In rounding out the book's discussion, the conclusion strives to envisage 'potentials for representational transgression,' the ambition being to identify prospective opportunities emergent in the previous chapters in order to begin consolidating a basis for new ways to document warfare. A short epilogue takes a step in this direction, extending the book's purview from the Middle East to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, where timeworn challenges are recast anew. 'Individual journalists can bear witness to suffering, they can give voice to the voiceless,' Blacksin writes, 'but journalism, as a signifying system, continues to control the representation of war and to hide the impacts of this imposition' (pp. 237-238).

To close, *Conflicted: Making News from Global War* constitutes a major intervention for critical scholarship, in my view, and as such is essential reading not only for those concerned with war reportage, but also for anyone endeavoring to rethink familiar presumptions about journalistic form, practice and epistemology. This is not to deny the book's narrative places firm demands on the reader at times, inviting as it does an empathetic immersion in complexity. It progresses slowly, taking its measure to develop a mode of argumentation, particularly when shifting between analytical repertoires to draw out subtle nuances of detail from multifaceted methods and perspectives. Blacksin's firsthand experiences resonate throughout, his self-reflexivity

about theory and practice infusing interpretive evaluation at every turn. One of its central problematics – ‘journalists reporting from conflict find themselves in conflict with journalism’ – proves to be as productive as it is provocative, encouraging us to refocus our attention onto what might otherwise be othered, ignored, trivialized, or ruled out as irrelevant in our customary ways of thinking and researching. As such, it is certain to have a lasting impact on those prepared to make the familiar strange, and in so doing, contribute to the work of forging an alternative vision of war reportage.

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