

**The Outlaw Rhetoric of Hunter S. Thompson:
Emerging Rhetorical Themes in Journalism**

by

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Abstract

This thesis will explore the genre of outlaw rhetoric through the lens of the early letters of Hunter S. Thompson, who constructed the persona of outlaw journalist and helped create the genre in the process. Using Thompson's first volume of letters, *The Proud Highway: Saga of a Desperate Southern Gentleman 1955-1967*, this project will detail the characteristics, functions, and form of outlaw journalism, show how they are intertwined, and provide examples of the attributes at work. Those functions: (1) identifying the rhetor as a defiant victim, (2), presenting the rhetor as a outlier, and (3) using exaggeration and absurdity to achieve those aims served Thompson well during his prolific career, and he stands as an example of the genre personified to its maximum potential. In order to achieve these functions, Thompson relied on a form that included (1) using victimization vernacular when referring to the rhetor, (2), exemplifying the outlier role via his constructed persona, and (3) employing dynamic and brazen hyperbole to escalate a situation into the absurd realm. The components of the form allowed Thompson to use the functions to serve his goals, which as an outlaw journalist included spotlighting oppression, hypocrisy and wrongdoing while holding leaders of hegemonic power structures accountable for their actions and misdeeds. Many of Thompson's works have been examined and scrutinized in years past, but this project is novel because of its use of that early volume of letters, as well as for its connection of the writer's construction of persona to the genre of outlaw journalism.

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CHAPTER I

Introduction and Thesis

Hunter S. Thompson was never a man to mince words. In a 1968 letter to his brother, Davison, he summed up his feelings after witnessing Chicago police brutally attack Vietnam War protesters at the Democratic National Convention that August, mixing both shock and anger in his dispatch.

It was a real Hitler scene, the air smelled of fear and desperation. I'm trying to write about it now, as part of my alleged new book, but it's hard to explain except as a final loss of faith in whatever this country was supposed to stand for, all that bullshit in the history books. (Thompson, 2000, p. 137)

That raw and unfiltered letter is one of many vibrant and emotion-laden examples of the rhetorical style of Hunter Stockton Thompson (1937-2005), who rose to prominence as an American journalist and author in the late 1960s and remained an important voice in journalism until his death by suicide at the age of 67. Thompson became one of the loudest and most recognizable voices of his generation through his work in major national publications and consistent presence in the pages of *Rolling Stone*, for his fervent admonishment of the establishment, government, society, and the routines and practices of mainstream journalism, and for his alignment with outsiders, rebels, outlaws, and the downtrodden. The previous excerpt is representative of the rhetorical style Thompson developed and honed throughout his career, a style that continues to be relevant today.

This project is concerned with the qualities of Thompson's unique rhetorical style. Thompson helped establish the genre of "outlaw journalist." His style seemed irregular by most

standards, but his aggressive and vibrant rhetoric served important functions. Its formal qualities positioned the rhetor as an outsider, or “truth-teller,” an actor who was uniquely situated to critique what they considered flawed power structures, though the stylistic choices functioned more to emphasize problems than provide solutions. Thompson’s utilization of absurd and extreme hyperbole also served the function of challenging authority.

Thompson took the responsibility of the “Fourth Estate” to regulate authority and serve as a societal watchdog extremely seriously and portrayed himself as a rebel with a moral conscience (Thompson, 1997). He also chose to be a writer because of an innate desire to become famous, although that pursuit was secondary to his other intentions (Thompson, 1997). His stylistic choices and positioning as an outsider raging against establishments was reflected in his rhetoric. In the following section, I will present a biographical sketch of Thompson and the environment in which he operated as a major voice in American culture. In addition, I will outline ways in which his letters reflect the persona he would develop throughout his life, present background information about his influences and contemporaries, and detail the rhetorical techniques he would employ to serve his purposes as a writer.

The Outlaw That Was Hunter S. Thompson

Thompson was born in Louisville, Kentucky, and became a prolific writer who used first-person perspectives to deliver biting social critiques on a myriad of topics, from politics, society, and civil rights, to sports, journalism, and government. He is chiefly known for his novels *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (Thompson, 1971) and *The Rum Diary* (Thompson, 1998), both of

which have been made into movies starring Johnny Depp, as well as *Hell's Angels: The Strange and Terrible Saga of the Outlaw Motorcycle Gangs* (Thompson, 1966), and *Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail '72* (Thompson, 1973). Thompson also had a significant impact on other forms of journalism; he helped put *Rolling Stone* on the map as a magazine of cultural clout, importance, and substance during its foundational years in the 1970s (Hagan, 2017).

Thompson developed a unique writing and reporting style that has since been categorized under the umbrella of “New Journalism” alongside contemporaries such as Tom Wolfe, Truman Capote, Norman Mailer, Joan Didion, and Gay Talese. Scholars have noted that New Journalism deviated from traditional journalism practices by making the reporter part of the report (Schudson, 1978). New Journalism also used new techniques and styles to deliver the news as commentary, including a subjective perspective that Thompson magnified to the status of outrage, although the construction at times was more reactionary than deliberate. Thompson (2003) stated:

I wasn't trying to be an outlaw writer. I never heard of that term; somebody else made it up. But we were all outside the law: Kerouac, Miller, Burroughs, Ginsberg, Kesey; I didn't have a gauge as to who was the worst outlaw. I just recognized allies: my people.
(p. 51)

He even created his own form, which came to be known as “Gonzo” journalism, a term to describe the chaos that often surrounded the escapades in which he was a central figure (McKeen, 2008). The style he honed as a developing journalist and novelist became distinct for its irregularity, ferocity, and powerful delivery mechanism and was popular with audiences, though it dismayed his editors. Thompson saw himself as a mirror to society, someone holding

the powerful accountable and providing a voice to those relegated to the shadows by established hierarchies (Thompson, 1997).

In a 1964 letter to friend Paul Semonin, Thompson (1997) hinted at his desire to be a voice of the “outlaw,” writing:

My position is and always has been that I distrust power and authority, together with all those who come to it by conventional means—whether it is guns, votes, or outright bribery. There are two main evils in the world today: one is Poverty, the other is Governments. And frankly I see no hope of getting rid of either. (p. 429)

Such comments were common in Thompson’s rhetoric. He characterized himself as a truth-teller to power, someone who was speaking for those without a voice. The “outlaw journalist” identity he portrayed grew to epic proportions because of his tendency to point out hypocrisy, shine a light on the lack of decency in the world, and rail against anything that outsiders like himself felt was wrong or “phony” (Thompson, 1997). While Thompson occasionally offered solutions for the problems he illuminated in some of his works, he most often took the absurd route and aggrandized potential resolutions to the point of absurdity. He made conscious rhetorical choices that highlighted that role as a writer who prided himself on serving as a societal overseer, a model that others would follow. Thompson became the central figure around which other counterculture icons aligned.

In addition to F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway, Thompson’s literary development was influenced by Colin Wilson’s book *The Outsider*, which provided an example of someone who identified with the fringe elements (Thompson, 1997). His ideological insights partly came from books like William Styron’s *Lie Down in Darkness* and Ayn Rand’s *The*

Fountainhead. In addition, George Orwell's works *Down and Out in Paris and London* and *Homage to California* inspired his style and form that would eventually become the "Gonzo" journalism for which Thompson was best known. Few did a better job in making a career out of personifying the outlaw persona than Thompson.

The outlaw persona he cultivated that would go on to define Thompson's later career was clearly exhibited in his early correspondence, particularly the twelve years included in the anthology *The Proud Highway: Saga of a Desperate Southern Gentleman 1955-1967* (Thompson, 1997). The book includes more than 200 pieces of correspondence written by Thompson during the time he was age eighteen to thirty, and the letters lend an insight into the budding writer's development and evolution during that era of his life. From an internal battle to decide if he would become a journalist or an author while struggling to find his voice as a writer, to the development and evolution of his worldview and philosophies on life and his acquisition of success and a reputation as a distinct and influential voice in American society, the letters illustrate Thompson's developing form. That form fueled his fire as a perceptive and powerful social critic and become a model for other writers who also identified as outlaws and who took intense scrutiny of authority as a duty of their roles as societal protectors. An analysis of the rhetorical form of his outlaw persona in his early correspondence provides insight into the development of this important genre.

The Power of Letters

Thompson's propensity for producing correspondence is perhaps not as well-known as his other works. He was a prolific letter writer, clicking out hundreds and hundreds of dispatches to friends, family, loved ones, acquaintances, enemies, creditors, bill collectors, and even people he did not know. In 1959, he wrote to author William Faulkner to praise his novel *The Sound and*

the Fury, remarking thusly about the profession: “As far as I can see, the duty, the obligation, and indeed the only choice of the writer in today’s ‘outer’ world is to starve to death as honorably and defiantly as possible” (Thompson, 1997, p. 164). Faulkner did not respond to the letter, but Thompson did receive a response to a rambling and raving missive he sent to President Lyndon B. Johnson in 1964 while drunk at a Holiday Inn in Pierre, South Dakota, asking to be appointed governor of American Samoa. Larry O’Brien, a special assistant to the president, replied and said he would “be given every consideration,” but Thompson withdrew his request a year later, via another letter, in outrage over Johnson’s escalation of the Vietnam War (Thompson, 1997). These letters and the collection from the book are important for several reasons.

First, the correspondence served as Thompson’s laboratory for molding and shaping his beliefs and personality, giving him room to “stretch his legs” as a writer, try new and risky techniques, and share controversial ideas and thoughts with friends and family as a litmus test of sorts. He went on to transfer many of those thoughts and beliefs to public-facing pages (his first anthology of letters was not published until 1997) while sharpening his deployment of the “outlaw journalist” personage. He exhibited consistent self-critiques throughout the letters, references that would become customary in his published work. For instance, he referred to himself as a “incredibly wicked nephew” in a 1956 letter to his aunt, Elizabeth “Lee” Ray, (Thompson, 1997, p. 15) and identified himself as the “black-sheep brother” in a letter to his half-brother Jack later that year (Thompson, 1997, p. 19). Thompson frequently wrote to his mother Virginia between 1955-1967, often sharing his general sense of despair, anxiety over being broke, and the struggles he was having forming an identity and establishing himself as a professional writer. That air of anguish would remain a consistent theme for the “harangued” writer throughout his career (Thompson, 1997).

Second, the correspondence also gave him a therapeutic outlet with which to air his frustrations and grievances to “safe” audiences that included family and friends. These letters helped serve as the philosophical basis for the outlaw scribe he would become, reflecting the seedlings of his thought processes. To friend Porter Bibb III in 1956, Thompson wrote about his desire to be an individual who stood apart from the herd, as well as his belief that being considered just another member of a “mob” was an insult (Thompson, 1997). He often waxed poetic, contemplated life, and debated important social topics in lengthy dispatches to close friend Paul Semonin, including a reference to the mind of America being “seized by a fatal dry rot” in a 1958 letter (Thompson, 1997, p. 137).

Form and Function of the Outlaw Journalist

Thompson’s stylistic gravitation to the realm of “outlaw journalist” was one he cultivated during the formative time period of his life and was reflected in his letters from 1955-1967. That evolution was a process reflected in that correspondence as he bounced from job to job, house to house, and assignment to assignment. The phrase “outlaw journalist” requires definition for the purposes of this research project. Forever identifying as an outsider, Thompson fit the moniker of “outlaw” for several reasons, including his disdain for order and authority, hypocrisy, establishments in which he did not believe, and perceived unnecessary formalities, as well as for his rage against oppression or injustice of any kind (McKeen, 2008). Outlaws do not play by the rules, nor do they subscribe to the conventional wisdom of their peers, and Thompson exemplified the moniker in those ways. In fact, he referred to himself as “The Outlaw of Big

Sur” in various letters in 1960, referencing one of six places the writer lived that year alone (Thompson, 1997). Outlaws function outside the parameters of normalcy and identify as misunderstood outsiders, and Thompson has been referred to as an outlaw journalist for decades by fans, fellow scribes, and biographers (McKeen, 2008).

His “outlaw” voice connected with others in American society who considered themselves “rejects” of varying kinds, and his voice resonated with a segment of the population that would not be offended by the “outlaw” moniker (McKeen, 2008). While Thompson referred to himself as an outlaw, this study is particularly interested in the markers from his writing that helped create and cultivate this persona and the rhetoric he employed and deployed. The form of the outlaw journalist that Thompson created, cultivated, and mastered helped him voice the grievances he saw and experienced in America and gave him a literary vehicle with which to search for justice, change, truth, and the heart of the American Dream (Thompson, 1997).

Thompson was intentional with his work, especially when it came to wielding a pen as a sword as a critical voice in society, but his writing also was highly performative in nature. By utilizing absurdity and explosive adjectives to exaggerate the magnitude of his struggles or plight, Thompson created an allure from his readers for that style of demonstrative and verbose prose that became his calling card. The caché derived from the theatrical presentation within the pages of his works fueled Thompson’s passion and helped establish him as one of the dominant voices of his time. His functions as an outlaw journalist and vibrant voice ranged from illuminating oppression, wrongdoing, and greed, to representing the thoughts and views of the forgotten segments of society that were marginalized by hegemonic power structures. As a result, fame and a cultlike following among his readers followed, but Thompson also became a prisoner of his own creation. He was always expected to be the live wire exploding with hijinks at every

turn, and that “Gonzo” pressure became a burden he would carry the remainder of his days. That weight, in addition to physical ailments and issues, contributed to his self-inflicted departure from the world (McKeen, 2008).

Thompson’s Context

The time frame of the letters is important, as it was during that time, 1955-1967, that Thompson and other cultural figures were witnessing a wave of social and political change that influenced their writing. The conservatism of the post-war era in the United States had begun to give way to a vastly more open and experimental time in the late 1950s and 1960s (Schudson, 1978). In those decades, journalism began to report more often about the impact of counterculture movements as agents of change in the evolving world (Schudson, 1978). The majority of political journalists of the time and preceding decades, however, rarely shared opinions in their pieces, with writers such as R.W. Apple Jr. from *The New York Times* playing it safe with personality “puff pieces” and others in the business accused of neutered “pack journalism” that was devoid of scrutiny of candidates and elected officials (Crouse, 2003).

The Beats like Jack Kerouac strayed from the traditional narrative trends of post-World War II America, helping normalize the act of highlighting societal issues through writing and journalism, but they were not as aggressive as outlaw journalists of Thompson’s ilk. Thompson, who himself hitchhiked around the country in 1958, enjoyed Kerouac’s 1957 novel *On the Road* that gained critical and mainstream acclaim, but criticized the author and other peers for not taking a more active and aggressive stance as social critics. Instead, to Thompson, they simply

served as lenses through which readers could catch a glimpse of American society of the time, presenting reflections devoid of serious critique (Thompson, 1997). Thompson, who was roughly a decade younger than most of the Beat writers, took their annoyances a step further, arguing that the entire system was corrupt and that everyone was to blame for the woes of the world (Thompson, 1997).

In the multimedia sphere, the modernism and commercialism of television journalism in the early 1950s influenced coverage of Hollywood (Gould, 2002). Thanks largely due to an amenable relationship among TV journalists, politicians, and the Federal Communications Commission, investigative journalism was not the norm in these days, with journalists trading access for exposure and influenced by factors such as all-expenses-paid “junkets” for writers funded by businesses, advertisers, and networks that helped keep the salacious details of the medium hidden from the public (Gould, 2002). Years later, that trend would be contrasted sharply by Thompson’s overt, consistent, and even venomous critiques of public figures, especially politicians like Richard Nixon, Edmund Muskie, Hubert Humphrey, and countless others. His novel *Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail '72* was touted for its accurate portrayal of life on a presidential campaign trail and for Thompson’s detailed reporting (Crouse, 2003), but he thoroughly criticized candidates of all parties and walks of life within its pages (Thompson, 1973).

A large driver of the shift that empowered writers like Thompson was the counterculture movement, which had antecedents in the 1950s and expanded by epic proportions in the cataclysmic 1960s (Bach, 2020). Movements such as the Hippies, who practiced free love while shirking responsibility, called for world peace, while civil rights groups like the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense searched for equality by any means necessary. The prevalence of these

types of groups signaled a changing tide of groups of Americans who bucked the trends and rejected the norms as restrictive or irrelevant (Bach, 2020). Music transformed considerably as the counterculture factions gained momentum, with singer-poets like Bob Dylan and John Lennon producing immensely popular songs demanding social change and events such as Woodstock and other festivals reflecting the country's need for artistic avenues by which to spark revolutions (Bach, 2020). Writers who made major societal impact included Tim Leary, who proposed mind-altering drugs as the key to achieving enlightenment, and Ken Kesey, who helped link the Beats with the Hippies (Bach, 2020).

Thompson was partly a product of this environment, but also rode the wave of change into new theoretical mindsets that came to define his outlaw approach. He wrote about this wave while reminiscing about the end of the 1960s in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*:

Strange memories on this nervous night in Las Vegas. Five years later? Six? It seems like a lifetime, or at least a Main Era—the kind of peak that never comes again. San Francisco in the middle sixties was a very special time and place to be a part of. Maybe it meant something. Maybe not, in the long run ... but no explanation, no mix of words or music or memories can touch that sense of knowing that you were there and alive in that corner of time and the world. Whatever it meant ... There was madness in any direction, at any hour. If not across the Bay, then up the Golden Gate or down 101 to Los Altos or La Honda ... You could strike sparks anywhere. There was a fantastic universal sense that whatever we were doing was right, that we were winning ... And that, I think, was the handle—that sense of inevitable victory over the forces of Old and Evil. Not in any mean or military sense; we didn't need that. Our energy would simply prevail. There was no point in fighting—on our side or theirs. We had all the momentum; we were riding the

crest of a high and beautiful wave ... So now, less than five years later, you can go up on a steep hill in Las Vegas and look West, and with the right kind of eyes you can almost see the high-water mark—that place where the wave finally broke and rolled back.

(Thompson, 1971, pp. 66-68)

The volatility of the time, with new and powerful counterculture elements emerging from coast to coast, brought with it opportunity, setting the stage for powerful voices to emerge, especially those from the fringe (Bach, 2020). From race riots and the civil rights battle to Nixon and Watergate, civil and political unrest, police brutality and near constant turmoil surrounding the Vietnam War, the United States was a country ripe for social criticism of the style mastered by the most prominent and influential writers of the time. Journalists perhaps felt more betrayed by the establishment's lies because of the support they had given government and other national leaders in their publications' pages, and writers who wanted to exact change, earn retribution, or point out hypocrisy were more than willing to deliver scathing reactions in their prose via sharpened pencils and flurries at the typewriter (Schudson, 1978).

Changes were also prevalent in news reporting. Post-World War II America saw a rise in critical culture in the 1960s, and that included a rebellion of young reporters who would not accept the status quo or establishment's rhetoric at face value (Schudson, 1978). Writers like Hedda Hopper and Louella Parsons from the Hollywood gossip pages who pre-dated Thompson penned the occasional societal and establishment critique in addition to their customary promotional pieces, but hard-nosed exposes were rare. Television critics such as Jack Gould, George Rosen, and John Crosby called the networks onto the carpet after the quiz show scandals of the 1950s revealed that not all of the prize-winning drama from those programs was authentic or organic, but instead had been manufactured through rigged results (Boddy, 1990). In fact,

those scandals undermined Americans' trust in broadcasters, and politicians called public hearings to sift through the controversy and assess fault. Meanwhile, an adversarial nature between critics and networks played out in the pages of industry publications like *Variety* in the form of articles, quotes, and even paid advertising (Boddy, 1990).

With space for criticism growing in society, figures such as Thompson were able to build followings and secure a foothold, especially after the nation's loss of innocence following the assassinations of John F. Kennedy in 1963 and Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Kennedy in 1968 (Schudson, 1978). Those catastrophic events decimated the likes of Thompson, who made his first "fear and loathing" reference while dispatching a letter to a friend the day JFK was assassinated. In another part of that same letter, Thompson wrote more about his mental state:

The killing has put me in a state of shock. The rage is trebled. I was not prepared at this time for the death of hope, but here it is. ... This is the end of reason, the dirtiest hour of our time. ... The savage nuts have shattered the great myth of American decency.

(Thompson, 1997, p. 420)

In addition, the U.S. government increasingly drew his and others' ire after committing a series of missteps, including the escalation of the Vietnam War, incensed racial conflict in the late 1960s, and Watergate in the early 1970s (Schudson, 1978). This rebellious atmosphere was the perfect recipe for Thompson and others like him to thrive as social commentary authorities.

Thompson's contemporaries included figures such as music critic Lester Bangs, who regularly wrote for *Rolling Stone*. Bangs famously criticized Black Sabbath's first album as a Cream imitation (Ewing, 2010) and also wrote scathingly about the band MC5, saying, "Friends, the MC-5 don't know shit about rock and roll. But compared to their political acumen, their

understanding of rock is truly prolific” (Hagan, 2017, p. 150). Even Bruce Springsteen was not immune to Bangs’ harsh review, as the writer said this about his album *Greetings from Asbury Park*: “He sort of catarrh-mumbles his ditties in a disgruntled mushmouth sorta like Robbie Robertson on Quaaludes with Dylan barfing down the back of his neck” (Hagan, 2017, pp. 292-293). Bangs, who died in 1982 at the age of thirty-three after an accidental overdose, was active and prolific between 1969-1982, mostly in the pages of *Rolling Stone*, but also in *Creem* after he was fired by *Rolling Stone*’s Jann Wenner in 1973 for overly harsh criticisms of bands. Bangs was another example of the aggressively critical writer who emerged in the 1960s and 1970s to challenge the status quo and rage against the machine, a product of the time like Thompson who rose to prominence partly thanks to the atmosphere and movements in society that helped birth the incendiary environment evolving throughout the country.

Another contemporary who was popular among readers during the Thompson era was George Plimpton, who could be viewed as a similar voice thanks to his first-person forays into the sports world in writing such as the novel *Paper Lion* that was reminiscent of the form that would become Thompson’s “Gonzo” journalism. Social activists like Ken Kesey, who emerged as an influential change-maker pushing for the legalization of marijuana and psychedelics, also carried strong followings, while a host of gossip and tabloid journalists such as Walter Winchell and critics like Jack Gould of *The New York Times* and Pauline Kael of *The New Yorker* focused on filmmaking and the scandalous side of Hollywood and the television industry (Boddy, 1990). Many of those, as well as other writers of the time, also deployed either first-person diatribes or fell into the social critic category along with Thompson. Thompson and his contemporaries were prominent, popular, proficient, and personable, a combination that made their writing appealing to audiences hungry for sharp and entertaining writing.

Reflecting and criticizing the absurdity of society's realities, especially when it came to injustice and oppression, was a larger cultural trend developing at the time. Journalists and other cultural figures illuminated the hypocrisy that permeated various circles of American society. For example, in legacy media, reporters Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein broke the Watergate story and held President Richard Nixon and his administration accountable. Writing for *The Washington Post*, Woodward and Bernstein helped expose a Nixon administration-led break-in at the Democratic national headquarters at the Watergate Office Building in Washington, D.C., heading into the 1972 election, a break-in and cover-up that would ultimately force Nixon's resignation in 1974 (Bernstein & Woodward, 1974). Columnists such as Red Smith, Jim Murray, and Dick Schaap in the sports world and Judith Crist and Andrew Sarris in entertainment news were not reticent about holding authoritarian figures responsible for their actions either. Gloria Steinem as a voice of feminism, social justice, and change in the 1960s and 1970s, and Marie Colvin, the foreign affairs correspondent for England's *The Sunday Times* who was killed in Syria while on assignment and portrayed deftly by Rosamund Pike in the 2018 film *A Private War*, held the powerful accountable and served as voices for others through their work.

Critiques also became more customary in the entertainment realm thanks to movie critics such as Gene Siskel, Roger Ebert, and Leonard Maltin, writers who could lambast films and exert palpable influence on the box office and movie studios' bottom lines with their reviews. Their impact in America was profound and can still be felt today, especially among those who remember reading social critiques regularly as part of their daily news consumption. Later, writers like Chuck Palahniuk, whose novel and movie *Fight Club* still stands as an anti-establishment beacon that resonated with millions of fringe-dwellers who celebrate chaos and anarchy as Americans' birthrights, have stated their reverie for pioneers like Thompson.

Palahniuk listed Thompson as one of his “heroes” along with Bob Woodward, Carl Bernstein, Tom Wolfe, and Nellie Bly (Palahniuk, 2022).

Other writers who fueled the literary subculture movement in the 1950s known as the “Beat Generation,” poets and authors who rejected standard narrative values and materialism in post-World War II America, had an impact on the scene in which Thompson was operating. Beat poets and writers such as Alan Ginsberg, William S. Burroughs, Jack Kerouac, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, and Joyce Johnson were exceptional voices in society thanks to their ability to connect with citizens who wanted the status quo challenged and believed on a visceral level that change was sorely needed (Charters, 2003). The “Beatniks” helped set the stage for a more dynamic and effervescent media figure like Thompson to emerge. Thompson’s journalistic contemporaries and predecessors such as Kerouac also had far-ranging impact, but Thompson set out to become even more of a mirror to society while employing a first-person perspective in his writing (Thompson, 1997).

This contextual examination has explored Thompson’s identity development and background, referenced his influences and contemporaries, and described the form and function of his letters and work. By describing the environment in the country at the time, including the effect the counterculture movement had on American society and on writers like Thompson, thematic patterns have emerged that will shed light on the eventual evolution of the outlaw journalist persona.

Conclusion

The principles of outlaw journalism, which Thompson helped develop, establish, and mobilize, include a counterculture-style skepticism of authority and establishments, a natural disdain for hypocrisy of any sort, the desire for truth, fairness, and justice at any cost, and alignment with factions of society that have been marginalized or pushed to the fringe (McKeen, 2008). Thompson emulated and represented those qualities and more, including a search for the “American Dream,” the pursuit of perfection, and an odyssey to find leaders and representatives from all levels of society who were pure, authentic, and honest (Thompson, 1997). Those desires were consistent themes in his writing, especially his collection of letters from *The Proud Highway*, and this project will explore that in more detail in the analysis section.

This examination of Thompson’s letters is novel, as his early correspondence has not been scrutinized in great detail in a project of this nature. To date, his letters have not been used as thorough insight into Thompson in this manner, and the broader rhetorical form he developed and others later adopted has not been analyzed in this way. In the process, this project will establish Thompson not only as a social change-maker, but as a genre-builder who blazed a trail that was both impactful on a major stage and innovative for its form and execution. This project will add new, fresh insight into the creation of the outlaw journalist persona and its form and function through the lens of Thompson and his work. This thesis aims to illustrate how outlaw journalism, a term ascribed from others’ references to the writer for this analysis, works as a rhetorical form through an examination of Thompson, who was the best example for illustrating that phenomenon. For the purposes of this project, outlaw journalism is defined as journalism conducted by rhetors who do not play by the rules, who offer scathing criticisms of establishment

and hegemonic power structures using absurd, exaggerated, and aggressive prose, and who do so in a defiant manner to either call for justice or highlight injustice in society. Its functions include (1) presenting the rhetor as a non-compliant victim, (2) identifying as a societal outlier, and (3) using exaggeration and absurdity to achieve those goals. Furthermore, outlaw journalism's form takes the shape of (1) an oppressed victim, (2) a rogue outsider who critiques from afar, and (3) rhetoric that is vibrant with absurd hyperbole.

The following chapter will explore the theoretical aspects of this project, particularly genre creation and its place in rhetorical criticism, as well as detail the rhetorical avenues and qualities of the form as a tool for social criticism. It also will describe the nuances and delivery methods of the function of the particular type of rhetoric used by writers like Thompson. Finally, it will begin to set the stage for a detailed analysis of Thompson and his work in the following section in Chapter III that will seek to answer the research questions and contextualize his impact on society through his writing. At the same time, it will examine his personal correspondence as illustrations of his developing voice during those formative years of his life.

This thesis will attempt to answer a pair of research questions, namely:

What are the qualities of an outlaw persona that Thompson pioneered, and what form emerged from his writing?

What are the purposes of those qualities, and how did they function to shape the realm of outlaw journalism?

CHAPTER II

Rhetorical Theory and Generic Criticism

To construct an analysis of this nature effectively and thoroughly, it is important to define several terms and theoretical concepts to methodically apply them to the project. From definitive characteristics, the form, and function of rhetorical genres, to an illustration of outlaw rhetoric and the function it derives from its form, this section will establish definitions, the aspects that shape rhetorical action and its form, and qualities that are specific and unique to the world of outlaw journalism. These theoretical guideposts and explanations will create a framework by which the genre can be examined, an important distinction for this study from a framework standpoint heading into the analytical chapter that follows.

Rhetoric as a Lens

Scholars define rhetorical criticism as, “the process of thinking about symbols, seeing how they work, and trying to figure out how and why they affect us,” (Foss, 2009, p. 3). Rhetoric involves the deliberate and conscious selection of symbols to execute that communication, and rhetorical criticism is the analysis of the result of those choices (Foss, 2009). One of those methods is genre criticism. The word genre, with French roots, is defined as: “a distinct group, type, class, or category of artifacts that share important characteristics that differentiate it from other groups” (Foss, 2009, p. 137). Genre is an element of rhetoric, one that can align forces or groups of like-minded individuals through commonalities that range from gender and ideology to religion and communication practices (Campbell & Jamieson, 1978). A rhetorical genre is a

clustering of a trio of different elements, namely: (1) situational requirements, (2) substantive and stylistic characteristics, and (3) an organizing principle (Foss, 2009, p. 137). Formal similarities establish genres, and their relevant forms are complex aspects of public discourse (Frye, 1957). Therefore, stylistic forms of the genres are strategically selected to respond to specific situations, and the organization of the characteristics within the rhetorical constellation is what makes the genre unique (Campbell & Jamieson, 1978).

The Form and Function of Rhetorical Genres

The use of the word genre when referring to types of rhetoric encapsulates varying categories of rhetoric as a communication tool. Whether the type is conversational, critical, doctrinal, centered on women's rights, or even outlaw in nature, rhetorical genres have developed organically over time to codify the strategic or substantive elements that define them (Campbell & Jamieson, 1978). According to scholars, the historical use of genres or rhetorical categories was a matter of classification as various situations produced recurring rhetorical forms (Campbell & Jamieson, 1978). There also are strategic and substantive elements that help define genres and influence rhetoric that factor into the equation (Campbell & Jamieson, 1978).

Rhetorical scholars often say that form follows function, meaning the form of an artifact under examination is dependent upon the intended function of the rhetor. Forms vary to fit the functions, and that certainly is the case with outlaw rhetoric. Recurring forms are generated by their ability to answer repetitive communal problems, which directly affects the rhetoric's function upon delivery (Campbell & Jamieson, 1978). An example could be a political speech in which both candidates are presented with the same topics to discuss at a debate. Their forms, or patterns of message construction, are the same, but the rhetoric they use to illustrate the intended function of their participation in the debate and in the election itself will be unique to each

candidate. For instance, Barack Obama regularly featured thematic appeals such as inclusion, hope, and change as elements of his rhetorical approach to the 2008 presidential campaign, but he also varied his rhetoric at times based on geography, position in the polls, or context to best suit his needs (Coe & Reitzes, 2010). His opponent, John McCain, frankly acknowledged that he was privileging character over consistency and identity creation over the country's problems in his rhetoric, using it to craft a political identity he hoped would lead to a successful articulation of his character (Parry-Giles & Steudeman, 2016). As candidates and their teams make conscious choices about the use of rhetoric and its role in creating identity and connecting with potential voters, choices they hope will present the rhetor in the best light and result in election victories, so do other rhetors adapt recurring forms to address recurring situations.

In rhetoric, form is the content of the criticism, the way a rhetor chooses to structure his or her text (Campbell & Jamieson, 1978). The way it is framed, or presented to the public, can serve several functions, especially when divergent ideologies are involved. Rhetorical framing can inadvertently reaffirm a dominant set of discourses, as in the case of national media coverage of the Matthew Shepard murder in Wyoming, aiding hegemonies and those with traditional voices in avoiding criticism, scorn, or retribution (Ott & Aoki, 2002). In the Shepard case, researchers found that the way media framed certain aspects of the grisly hate crime softened the impact and brutality of the murder, lessening potential public recoil and reaction to the story (Ott & Aoki, 2002). For specific rhetorical genres, including outlaw journalism, form can also create the opposite while trying to ignite fervor among readers and the general public to inspire action or challenge to authority, but the level of impact or action inspired is difficult to quantify or validate. The varying functions and results due to strategic framing are functions of form, and

extreme examples such as exaggeration and the use of absurd rhetoric in outlaw journalism can inspire wide ranges of reactions and actions.

In general terms, how rhetoric is framed and the strategic choices employed by a specific genre can affect function and outcomes, particularly when biases inherent in storytelling, namely selectivity, partiality, and structure, are organized or presented strategically (Burke, 1941).

Rhetoric is centered on public life, and rhetorical acts are focused on the ideas and processes of present-day society. Recurrent forms within that deployment of rhetoric over time lend credence to the contention that constants in human action can be manifested rhetorically, placing immense power with the rhetor (Campbell & Jamieson, 1978).

Rhetors are not the only primary players when examining the effects of an influential rhetorical genre such as outlaw journalism. In 1950, scholar Harold Zyskind looked at Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address in an analysis that examined the role of the listener, finding that a rhetor's goal may be to fixate an idea into the minds of the audience by creating a powerfully emotional experience that may inspire future action. Outlaw rhetoric can work in the same fashion, especially since it utilizes electric and jarring language as a delivery mechanism. The researcher's contention was that rhetorical genres were a blend of elements drawn from a situation, an issue, sides of an argument, or from the audience itself, an example of deliberative, conscious creation often found in outlaw rhetoric (Zyskind, 1950). Planting a seed through illumination in an attempt to inspire change or action is a feature of outlaw rhetoric, but rather than serving as a direct problem-solver, its intended functions and desired outcomes include social awareness, activation, and even civil unrest.

The form and function of presidential addresses can provide insight into how form and function serve to meet audience expectations in rhetorical situations. Presidential rhetoric has

long been and remains a popular topic for researchers, and several studies have detailed the varying effects of their narrative constructions. For instance, scholars found that the rhetoric of George W. Bush following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, sought to unite a shell-shocked country by revitalizing faith in America's older generation, imploring citizens to rally around a war on terror, and reinvigorating the populace's obligations to each other and their country (Bostdorff, 2003). Conversely, the rhetoric of Donald J. Trump, researchers found, used vitriol, demeaning language, and exclusion tactics to influence broader political processes (Stuckey, 2020). Furthermore, Stuckey contended that Trump's strategic rhetorical choices demonstrated the ways in which a public figure such as a president can function as both an individual agent and a discursive node through which political addresses circulate (Stuckey, 2020).

When it comes to form, scholars contend that, "the analysis of forms and the comparison of rhetorical acts are essential elements in critical interpretation and evaluation" (Campbell & Jamieson, 1978, pp. 11-12). In the case of outlaw rhetoric, form can range from a rhetor highlighting a nonsensical situation, to that person maniacally raging against a transgression they believe to be heinous, diabolical, or even dangerous to the public in a forum such as a newspaper, novel, or magazine. Social critics and representatives from the fringe elements often carry the loudest voice, especially when the rhetors align themselves with well-known counterculture movements or ideals.

An Examination of Outlaw Rhetoric as a Genre

As a genre, outlaw rhetoric is signified by the mobilization of exaggeration and absurdity to create an atmosphere of oppression and victimization, often of the rhetor themselves, and indicate hegemonic abuse. The rhetor presents themselves as a defiant victim aligned with the

downtrodden to rally both empathy and rebellion from readers and magnify grievances against their oppressors. Outlaw rhetoric codes events and comments as wrongdoing, double standards, unfair practices, and exploitation by societal hierarchies, but usually does not offer a solution to the problem. The rhetor shines a light on the issue and those who abuse power while they position themselves outside the system, using that distance to validate their authenticity as its critic.

Outlaw journalism is centered upon three main rhetorical techniques: (1) presenting the rhetor as a defiant victim of authority or oppression, (2) playing the role of the outlier, and (3) using exaggeration and absurdity. Victimhood has been examined as a “dominant communicative logic” in several domains, including history, politics, and aesthetics, all of which are a central component of outlaw journalism (Chouliaraki & Banet-Weiser, 2021). Researchers have found that victimhood is not necessarily tied to actual oppression, but is a rhetorical stance. Some, such as civil rights activists, may be actual victims of oppressive systems, while others, such as notable authors, may use that identity for other rhetorical purposes that include spotlighting wrongdoing or aligning themselves with other victims to gain power or a public platform through association. The Black Lives Matter and #MeToo movements highlighted specific instances of oppression and wrongdoing in society, but authors and other rhetors who used the phrases in their writing and social media posts may have had other rhetorical goals while using the phrases and hashtags (Chouliaraki & Banet-Weiser, 2021).

The second technique, when the rhetor plays the role of defiant outlier, is a presentation tactic that aligns the author with society’s fringe elements as an identity choice. The identification gives the rhetor a distant vantage point from which to critique as a non-participant, a distance away from the limits of direct association. While victimhood places the rhetor in the

crosshairs of power structures and establishment hegemonies, the hapless goof identifier helps remove the rhetor from the path of the tornado, so to speak, allowing them to criticize from the sidelines. These two forces can counteract or even create ideological conflicts and contradictions within the mind of the rhetor, but the situational aspect of rhetoric allows the actor to shape-shift and utilize the outlaw techniques as needed.

The use of exaggeration and absurdity, it has been found, can be effective in applications such as advertising (Arias-Bolzmann et al., 2000), but also can breed skepticism among the masses, as in the case with crisis-laden rhetoric about climate change (Pasquini et al., 2023). Absurdity, as seen in recent Old Spice commercials, can be effective for being memorable with viewers (Arias-Bolzmann et al., 2000), while rhetoric regarding climate change facts and discoveries can be found to unintentionally incite debate, combative misinformation campaigns, or distrust among segments of the population (Pasquini et al., 2023). Overt exaggeration also can even foster resentment and contentious relationships among artists in the same discipline, as developed between writers David Foster Wallace and Bret Easton Ellis as a result of their contrasting personal philosophies and ideologies (Lee, 2023). Outlaw rhetoric has been traced back to the days of Shakespeare (Mann, 2012), and those who enlist it as a reflection of their personas often identify as outliers with obstinate viewpoints, especially in contemporary society (Kidd, 2018). That alignment with the fringe element through the deployment of unpopular narratives is a modus operandi of the outlaw, who frequently describes oneself as a “freak,” and that narrative construction can create tension between the forces of inclusion and individuality that fuels their creative fires (Kidd, 2018).

In summary, outlaw rhetoric has a multitude of applications and uses. Chief among them is the act of spotlighting unfair practices, hypocrisy, the propagation of untruths, and oppressive

hegemonic behavior, often to the point of obsessing about the accountability of authoritative figures. Outlaw journalism is not solution journalism; it calls attention to problems more often than it offers resolutions and does so in a grandiose, theatrical way that is unique to the genre. As a form of rhetoric, outlaw rhetoric thrives at the crossroads of politics and literature, with outlaw journalism as a tool that can catalyze unification, deliberation, inspiration, and social change (Campbell & Jamieson, 1978). By describing enactments, whether it be standing up to authority or calling attention to oppression, outlaw journalism at times hopes to inspire similar actions in those it reaches. Scholars maintain that rhetorical forms do not occur in isolation and that they exist objectively in the rhetorical act and in the perceptions of the critic, audience members, readers, and future rhetors (Campbell & Jamieson, 1978). That is the true power of outlaw rhetoric, a force from the fringe that can trigger societal awakenings, evolution, and revolution, even if those effects are unintended consequences.

This chapter also examined the various functions of rhetoric, which for outlaws included (1) making oneself the defiant victim of hegemonic oppression, (2) identifying oneself as an abnormal outlier, and (3) using absurdity to spotlight the incidents of victimization. It looked at the multiple pursuits that rhetoric can activate by using examples from past U.S. presidents, outlining the methods they have used to announce their intentions and accomplish their goals. That lens illustrated the ways rhetors may activate form and framing to serve functions that benefit them personally and professionally as elected officials. For Obama, his rhetoric functioned to unify his supporters (Coe & Reitzes, 2010), while Trump's rhetorical choices resulted in divisiveness and mobilized aggressive language to influence wide-ranging processes within the political machine (Stuckey, 2020). Bush's expressions and speeches also aimed to unite Americans (Bostdorff, 2003), but in much different circumstances than Obama, while

McCain's rhetorical framing emphasized character more so than addressed actual issues in the country (Parry-Giles & Steudeman, 2016). Those examples show how rhetoric can be used to affect function and results in myriad ways, and that concept can be applied to countless arenas and situations.

The function of identifying the rhetor as a defiant victim, which is the first technique of outlaw rhetoric, is to establish the speaker or author in a supplicated role, one that presents them as the operative being acted upon by sinister forces. That characterization aligns the rhetor on the victimized side, setting the stage for the genre's rhetoric to elaborate the severity and serious nature of the oppression. Secondly, by self-labeling as an outsider, the rhetor uses outlaw tactics to insulate themselves from their subject of criticism and the sources of the fundamental flaws that have been illuminated. The final quality of the outlaw genre, the use of absurdity and exaggeration, functions as the delivery mechanism to the rhetor's audience. By empowering hyperbole and elevating it to a heightened state, the deployment of absurd and exaggerated vernacular escalates the scenario in question to a level in which the rhetor can feel assured its impact will be maximized. In achieving this trio of functions, the rhetor arrives at the nexus of those elements, successfully delivering critiques and highlighting transgressions from a distance, a place where the sharp eye of criticism does not always extend to them. With no self-imposed pressure to problem-solve or point a critical lens upon themselves, the outlaw rhetor serves their function as a societal watchdog without being required to take responsibility for any negative incidents or suffer at the hands of critiques aimed in their direction.

Conclusion

In this section, we defined rhetoric, genre, rhetorical criticism, and outlaw rhetoric and detailed how they are manifested in form, as well as the functions they serve. In addition, this section described how rhetoric and genre are intertwined, how they are influenced by outside forces and trends, and how they impact audiences. This chapter also outlined the rhetorical techniques of outlaw journalism and described its form and function as a genre, while also touching on the importance of rhetorical framing. Thompson represented the genre completely, and he employed its techniques in his writing to highlight shortcomings and faults within power structures and society while serving his function as an outlaw journalist.

These descriptions, definitions, and concepts will be illustrated through the letters of Hunter S. Thompson in the following section, as the late scribe operated under the constructed persona of outlaw journalist. It will highlight his work as an example of the genre in action, provide connections between his persona and professional life, and align abstract concepts with real-world samples through Thompson's writing as a model.

CHAPTER III

Analysis

Per the previous chapter, outlaw rhetoric is centered upon three main rhetorical techniques: (1) presenting the rhetor as a defiant victim of authority or oppression, (2) playing the role of the outlier, and (3) using exaggeration and absurdity. Outlaw rhetoric uses these strategies to classify a particular situation, transgression, or cause as unjust and position an opponent as hypocritical, abusing power, or lying, among other transgressions. Thompson mobilized that construct regularly and routinely in his writing. These elements fall in the category of generic criticism, which features the use of rhetoric to induce similar needs and expectations in various audiences (Foss, 2009). Generic critics look for patterns or commonalities in recurring situations to understand certain rhetorical practices as a response to situations (Foss, 2009). Thompson's book of letters is an excellent illustration of this phenomenon. This thesis will illustrate the form and function of outlaw rhetoric by examining patterns and thematic features in his writing. By constructing an illustration with which to frame and analyze the patterns and findings from the letters, this chapter intends to answer the research questions and solidify the concept of outlaw rhetoric.

Rhetorical Markers of an Outlaw Journalist

Thompson regularly employed certain rhetorical techniques of outlaw rhetoric: (1) presenting the rhetor as a defiant victim of authority or oppression, (2) playing the role of the

outlier, and (3) using absurdity and exaggeration. These techniques positioned Thompson as a beacon with which readers could align.

The Rhetor as a Defiant Victim of Authority or Oppression

The first quality of outlaw rhetoric is the victimhood of the rhetor. Outlaws position themselves as maligned, forgotten, and persecuted by mainstream society and, in particular, authoritative administrators of the law and government by relying on a series of rhetorical markers. Thompson magnified that disconnect to a fever-pitch level, turning a spark into a bonfire by his claims of victimization. For instance, he would not simply report that a police officer gave him an order or that the two may have had an encounter, he would present himself as the defiant victim of brutality or unfair practices at the hands of law enforcement. He wrote to a friend in 1966 about an incident in which he was pulled over by California Highway Patrol, then “illegally” subjected to a search of his car (Thompson, 1997). After reporting that he ignored the ticket he was given by the officers, Thompson wrote: “Regardless of what the law says, to sit there and defy two meat-hungry cops is a form of masochism,” suggesting in an exaggerated way he was somehow “defying” the police as an unwilling victim when he was, in actuality, simply complying during the traffic stop (Thompson, 1997, p. 580).

This technique often involves hyperbole, as Thompson elevated statements into absurd exaggerations that bordered on the unhinged to shift readers’ focus onto a perceived atrocity, wrongful accusation, oppressive authoritarian power, or a marginalizing policy. A master of the use of adjectives, Thompson wove vibrant, electric, and superfluous language together to create a narrative that was popular with his readers throughout his career, and the seeds of that type of writing could be found in his correspondence as well. In a 1957 letter to the Chamber Music Society, Thompson victimized himself after receiving a past-due notice from the society, saying

he was, “a gentleman of impeccable honor and unimpeachable integrity” who had been “slandered and branded in this crude manner by a dark plot” and that the bill was “an astounding implication” that caused him “extreme mental anguish” (Thompson, 1997, p. 53). He also referred to himself as “destitute” in that letter, but said he would pay the bill, despite all the theatrics, and called the looming expense a reminder of his constant “terrifying taint of debt” (Thompson, 1997, p. 53). Even when Thompson found success after the sale of his book *Hells Angels*, he lamented about legal troubles and battles with publishers, telling friend and New Journalism contemporary Tom Wolfe in 1967 that legal troubles had stifled his mind to the point where he no longer enjoyed writing (Thompson, 1997). There was always a fight to escalate, always a blight or slight or plight to contend with, regardless of truthfulness.

Presenting the Rhetor as an Outlier

Secondly, outlaw rhetoric turns the rhetor into a hapless goof, heightening their outsider status and setting the stage for drama. Writers like Thompson who deployed outlaw rhetoric presented themselves as the “fall guy” and endeared themselves to certain readers by presenting the paradox of being in a state of “pleasant despair” (Thompson, 1997, p. 82). For outlaws, donning the shroud of the defiant victim was a consistent tactic, but the self-deprecating Thompson also would freely admit to being his own worst enemy, signifying a contradiction of identities within himself and the persona he constructed. Thompson would regularly acknowledge his propensity to be self-destructive, owning the fault as a badge of honor uncommon to outlaws, who rarely admitted guilt without being convicted. He considered his antagonistic time in the U.S. Air Force in the 1950s to be a product of the regulations and unbending nature of the military structure, venting to a friend in a 1957 letter about the “mule

train of military bureaucracy” as a major source of his troubles as an enlisted airman (Thompson, 1997, p. 72).

These components work together to help Thompson portray himself as an outlier or a freak, which, in turn, lays the foundation for his claims of being a defiant victim of oppression at the hands of established hegemonies. In a self-authored and unapproved press release in the base paper the *Command Courier* that announced his discharge from the military, Thompson referred to himself as an “uncontrollable iconoclast” and wrote about a fictitious incident in which he struck someone in the head with a wine bottle to cause his discharge (Thompson, 1997, p. 74-75). That type of dispatch, while pure fiction, heightens the absurd quotient of the construct Thompson is forming through the letter.

The ways in which Thompson referred to himself in his writing are particularly important here, as those references not only yield insight into his internal conflicts and identity issues, but also because they were constructed through deliberate rhetorical choices. For example, in one 1956 letter, Thompson referred to himself as the “black-sheep brother,” (Thompson, 1997, p. 19) and the following year called himself and his friends as a “hellish lot of misfits and eightballs” (Thompson, 1997, p. 46). He also used words and phrases like “antisocial” and “walking anomaly” to refer to himself in 1957 letters to friends (Thompson, 1997). He began a 1958 letter to friend Larry Callen by writing: “You have been singled out to bear the brunt of a nightmare, something very close to the alcoholic demise of a man who never quite seems to have a grip on things” (Thompson, 1997, p. 126). These types of self-descriptors and woeful references to himself and his plights were constants for Thompson throughout his career, and he was consistent in presenting himself in these ways in his work. He also exhibited delusions of grandeur and a touch of overblown self-importance, referring to himself on par with one of his

literary idols, even though he was just 21 at the time, writing: “Actually, I am already the new Fitzgerald: I just haven’t been recognized yet” (Thompson, 1997, p. 57).

Thompson also wrote about other outsiders he encountered. He described the scene in Berkeley, California, in a 1965 letter to editor Angus Cameron of the Alfred E. Knopf publishing house in response to a letter in which Cameron asked him about the possibility of writing a book on “American Loser-Outsider types.” Thompson (1997) wrote:

I have just finished another piece for *The Nation*; it concerns the “non-student” at Berkeley. There is another Outsider for you, but this one is a new breed. The reason that Losers are so important these days is that there are so many of them, and some are only Losers by other people’s definitions. (p. 525)

That aspect of the outlaw or loser persona, how its label is often cast upon the downtrodden outlier by others, is important to the rhetorical construction of the character.

The Use of Absurdity and Exaggeration

Finally, outlaw rhetoric relies on exaggeration and absurdity. Thompson’s frequent use of the “theater of the absurd” was strategic. In 1967, he lamented to friends about battles, some real and some exaggerated, he was “waging” with editors and publishing houses. While some of his troubles may have been legitimate, many were aggrandized for effect. He wrote:

I’m engaged on all fronts and barely holding my own. It’s the same old story: contracts, shysters, liars, thieves, etc. The net result, unfortunately, is that I’m somehow prevented, legally and financially, from writing another book. It’s a weird situation—the dirty underbelly of the writing industry. The foul crotch of literature. (Thompson, 1997, pp. 631-632)

The identity of the rhetor as a defiant victim, the first quality of outlaw rhetoric, is elevated through the adjectives and vernacular that amplify the writer's claims. Thompson wove dispatches that catapulted situations into the absurd. For instance, in a 1957 letter to a friend, Thompson referred to feelings of nostalgia as an "orgasm of reflections" and to his dreams of fame and fortune as "nostalgic comas" (Thompson, 1997, p. 44).

Thompson also regularly used fictional stories to illustrate real despair, mobilizing the "theater of the absurd" to its exhaustible limit. In a 1964 letter to a friend, Thompson even suggested he fabricated elements of his work, writing: "I have discovered the secret of writing fiction, calling it impressionistic journalism, and selling it to people who want 'something fresh'" (Thompson, 1997, p. 450). Extremely absurd adjectives served him well as an outlaw journalist; for example, he once referred to New York in 1965 as "a peatbog of slow-heating violence, physical and otherwise" (Thompson, 1997, p. 509). In a vibrant analysis of the writing he was doing that year, he wrote: "My recent work here has dealt with topless dancers, garbage in the bay, marijuana, karate, and a generally non-publishable hellbroth of vagrant interests" (Thompson, 1997, p. xxvi).

This section outlined the use of electric, exaggerated prose in the world of outlaw journalism, a realm where absurdity is used to highlight unbalanced situations in society where one person or group is victimized by another or a certain power structure. While it is commonly seen as theater by some, the technique of utilizing exaggerations and absurd narratives was a vital tool for an outlaw like Thompson, who relied on extreme measures to advance other purposes. For outlaws like him, calling for justice or highlighting the injustices prevalent in society also was an important goal of the rhetoric.

The trio of characteristics inherent in the outlaw persona, namely claims of victimhood, the deployment of exaggeration and absurdity via hyperbole, and identifying as a hapless mook or “freak,” intertwine to form a unique constellation. Absurd hyperbole helps deliver the rhetor’s messages of victimization and oppression, and the outlaw identifies as a freak or a goof who exists on the fringe of society. Particularly efficient rhetors such as Thompson even would assert that their victimization occurred *because* of their status as an outsider or outlaw, closing the circle on the triumvirate of techniques used within the genre.

The Functions of Outlaw Rhetoric

As was discussed in the previous chapter, the form of outlaw rhetoric is (1) to promote oneself as a defiant victim, (2) use exaggeration and absurdity to deliver messaging, and (3) identify as an outlier. In Thompson’s case, these themes are present in his work. Thompson has been described as a “public moralist,” a moniker he welcomed eagerly, as morality served as a “North star” throughout his life (Thompson, 1997, p. xxviii). Using literary tools such as wit, mockery, excess, absurdity, supreme self-confidence, as well as the “narrative of a wounded, meritorious ego and an idiopathic anger of the righteous outlaw,” Thompson used rhetorical devices in his role as a social critic, shaping his style and honing his form as he grew and evolved (Thompson, 1997, p. xvii). However, despite these self-stated goals, the rhetorical themes demonstrated here show that Thompson was fixated less on solutions and more on accusations. This is what outlaw rhetoric is best suited for: drawing attention to alleged grievances without resolving them. Next, this project will outline a trio of functions of the rhetorical form in action, namely: (1) to identify as an abnormal outlier, (2) make oneself the defiant victim of hegemonic oppression, and to (3) allege wrongdoing, hypocrisy, and dishonesty on the part of the oppressor.

Defiant Victim of Hegemonic Oppression

First, Thompson used social critique to create a sense of victimization and marginalization. He often wrote about the “search for the American Dream,” a quest writers like himself and citizens alike often found themselves embarking upon in the 1960s and 1970s (Thompson, 1997). The search was a thematic narrative of his outlaw journalist persona, with Thompson presenting himself as the disappointed critic on the fringe who was on the hunt for the elusive dream he felt had been lost in the country. For instance, he railed against what he viewed as “an epidemic of arrested development in the American Dream” and positioned himself as a defiant victim of that failure (Thompson, 1997, p. xxvi). After living in California in the 1960s, Thompson began to view the state as an example of that dream’s demise, writing to Carey McWilliams of *The Nation* in 1966:

California is the end, in every way, of Lincoln’s idea that America was “the last best hope of man.” ... The story has all elements of a tragic parable. California is the ultimate flower of the American Dream, a nightmare of failed possibilities. (Thompson, 1997, p. 573)

His writing highlighted his grievances with every aspect of society, a common mantra of the outlaw journalist, and those sources of disdain propelled Thompson’s rhetoric. Thompson did not reserve his grievances for outside agents or environments, commonly criticizing journalism with fervor. He was able to do so because he positioned himself outside of that mainstream gaggle, even during the years he wrote for newspapers. In a 1958 letter to *Editor & Publisher*, Thompson said newspapers were “overcrowded rest homes for inept hacks” and that journalism had “lost its ability to command respect as a profession” (Thompson, 1997, p. 142). By positioning himself outside the fold, Thompson removed himself as a potential component of the problem, at least in

his own mind, allowing him to stand apart and critique from afar. He also quipped that “objectivity is impossible in journalism,” an ironic statement from a writer who so commonly employed hyperbole and fiction in his work (Thompson, 1997, p. 570).

Another thematic pattern for Thompson’s criticism was the fraying fabric of American society, and he positioned himself as a resistant victim of that societal collapse. He not only aligned with those who were victimized by the power structures and hegemonic establishments, but claimed they were all victims of a corrupt and inept system. In 1966, Thompson wrote about his desire to flee the country in a letter to a friend, saying:

You may be right about me and the east. I can’t imagine living there; it’s too mean and crowded. The whole country is that way. The great experiment has failed. The Vietnam thing is the beginning of our end. I want to get out of the country before I get locked up. The problem is I don’t know where to go. (Thompson, 1997, pp. 569-570)

These disappointments were a common refrain, as is typical for outlaw rhetoric. In 1963, even before John F. Kennedy’s assassination, Thompson wrote in a dispatch from South America: “After a year of roaming around down here, the main thing I’ve learned is that I now understand the United States and why it will never be what it could have been, or at least tried to be” (Thompson, 1997, p. 372). A younger Thompson also wrote earnestly about the country to a friend, saying “The mind of America is seized by a fatal dry rot—and it’s only a question of time before all that the mind controls will run amuck in a frenzy of stupid, impotent fear” (Thompson, 1997, p. 137). Additionally, much of Thompson’s criticisms were broad or general enough to allow him to avoid suggesting actual solutions to the problems, as providing specific resolutions was not a customary function of the outlaw journalist.

Thompson's disdain for "Rotarian America," small-town and small-minded people who were natural conformists, was fueled by Sherwood Anderson's novel *Winesburg, Ohio*, and reinforced his alignment with the outsider. He used his interactions with small-community citizenry during his time as a newspaper reporter to illustrate dissatisfactions, and his feelings of alienation from the conforming masses further fed Thompson's persona as a noncompliant victim of a flawed and inflexible system (Thompson, 1997). The seeds of victimization Thompson exhibited in his early letters went on to bear fruit in his later writing. He would commonly return to the forms of victimhood, absurdity, and "freak" status he first established in the letters for the remainder of his career. A few years later, in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, Thompson critiqued the type of person he found in a Vegas casino in the early morning hours, writing:

Now off the escalator and into the casino, big crowds still tight around the craps [*sic*] tables. Who *are* these people? These faces! Where do they come from? They look like caricatures of used-car dealers from Dallas. But they're *real*. And, sweet Jesus, there are a hell of a *lot* of them—still screaming around these desert-city crap [*sic*] tables at four-thirty on a Sunday morning. Still humping the American Dream, that vision of the Big Winner somehow emerging from the last-minute pre-dawn chaos of a stale Vegas casino. (Thompson, 1971, p. 57)

He deployed his outlaw style as a social critic, activating hyperbole to attack his perceived ills in the world. Thompson constructed his outlaw persona to function as a shroud of sorts, one he wore to stand out from the crowd, rally favor against those who rose to power despite diabolical flaws, and deploy outrage as a rhetorical tool with which he could make an impact in society. Always the existential analyst, Thompson wrote to a friend in a 1958 letter, "you can either impose yourself on reality and *then* write about it, or you can impose yourself on reality *by*

writing” (Thompson, 1997, p. 130). The ironic twist, however, is that Thompson often fabricated his version of reality to align with his rhetoric and goals as an outlaw, imposing his will through fictitious situations and scenarios to perhaps inspire action from those with whom it connected.

Using Absurdity to Rally Against a Flawed Establishment

The second function of the outlaw genre is to make accusations of wrongdoing, double standards, oppression, and hypocrisy, especially within power structures like government. Thompson would use exaggeration and absurdity of the form to drive home his messaging, which is the second technique of outlaw rhetoric. Thompson positioned himself as a champion against entities, organizations, or public figures he considered corrupt, and he reflected that adversarial stance through scathing critiques and biting opinion pieces. Not only was he a defiant victim of an oppressor, but he was a victim of a failing establishment, a reality that was insult to injury for the outlaw (Thompson, 1997). Public figures like Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan were common targets for the genre of outlaw journalism, and Thompson exhibited contempt for those representatives from his earliest writings. For instance, in a 1963 letter to a colleague months after John F. Kennedy’s assassination, he referred to Nixon as “a hairy animal” and went on to lambast the politician, writing, “He is like a hyena that you shoot and gut, then see a few hours later, loping along in his stinking way, oblivious to the fact that he is not only dead, but gutted as well” (Thompson, 1997, p. 424). Thompson continued, “politics in this country for the next nine months is going to resemble nothing more than a Nazi cockfight ... my primary motive is to keep that man Nixon out of the presidency. ... he’s the most dangerous political punk who ever lurked in the nation” (Thompson, 1997, p. 424). In May 1964, nearly a decade before he would write a book about the 1972 presidential campaign, Thompson warned a friend to “forswear” the world of politics, writing: “It is a tub of dirty water” (Thompson, 1997, p. 453). A

year later, he had this to say about Reagan, two years before the former actor became governor of California: “Ronald Reagan is the prototype of the new mythological American, a grinning whore who will probably someday be President” (Thompson, 1997, p. 492). Furthermore, in a 1967 letter to a friend, Thompson communicated his thoughts on the importance of the outlaw voice and, specifically, an underground press in a democratic society, writing: “The basic function of the underground is to croak the establishment’s bullshit” (Thompson, 1997, p. 624). These themes would remain major threads in Thompson’s work in subsequent decades, with absurd rhetoric and exaggeration fueling his narrative.

His novel *Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail '72* illustrated that continuation and is an example of the fruit borne from the seeds planted in his early letters. It was littered with fire-breathing attacks against several of the presidential candidates. For example, he unleashed vicious skepticism about his perception of candidates’ two-faced treatment of voters, writing:

“The main problem in any democracy is that crowd-pleasers are generally brainless swine who can go out on a stage & whup their supporters into an orgiastic frenzy—then go back to the office & sell every one of the poor bastards down the tube for a nickel apiece” (Thompson, 1973, p. 127).

Similarly, in a later work, *The Great Shark Hunt: Strange Tales from a Strange Time*, Thompson used similar language about Nixon, saying:

Richard Nixon has never been one of my favorite people, anyway. For years I’ve regarded his very existence as a monument to all the rancid genes and broken chromosomes that corrupt the possibilities of the American Dream; he was a foul caricature of himself, a man with no soul, no inner convictions, with the integrity of a

hyena and the style of a poison toad. The Nixon I remembered was absolutely humorless; I couldn't imagine him laughing at anything except maybe a paraplegic who wanted to vote Democratic but couldn't quite reach the lever on the voting machine. (Thompson, 2003, p. 213)

Thompson also penned a gnarly obituary of his favorite political punching bag for *Rolling Stone* upon the former president's death, saying:

Richard Nixon is gone now, and I am poorer for it. He was the real thing—a political monster straight out of Grendel and a very dangerous enemy. He could shake your hand and stab you in the back at the same time. He lied to his friends and betrayed the trust of his family. Not even Gerald Ford, the unhappy ex-president who pardoned Nixon and kept him out of prison, was immune to the evil fallout. (Thompson, 1994)

Thompson was highly critical of the mainstream press, both in his published articles and personal correspondence. On March 31, 1958, Thompson wrote a letter to the *DownBeat* music magazine to cancel his subscription because of the publication's lack of, in his opinion, high-quality writing. He wrote:

Who are these hacks that spew out these articles, anyway? Don't you people have enough self-respect to hire a few good WRITERS? Christ on a crutch, man: if you people are as hard up for writers as you appear to be, then you need help in the worst way! Seriously now, if you really can't FIND any competent writers, then the very least I can do is to offer my assistance. (Thompson, 1997, p. 113)

Roughly a month later, he wrote to *The New York Times* in response to an advertisement for a reporter, suggesting one article he could write for the paper could be, “a subjective study of the

reasons for the alarming decline – in both quality and quantity – of young journalists” (Thompson, 1997, p. 120). Sticking with the theme of lack of faith in the state of journalism in October of 1958, Thompson wrote to Jack Scott of the *Vancouver Sun*, saying he had,

... developed a healthy contempt for journalism as a profession. As far as I’m concerned, it’s a damned shame that a field as potentially dynamic and vital as journalism should be overrun with dullards, bums, and hacks, hagridden with myopia, apathy, and complacency, and generally stuck in a bog of stagnant mediocrity. (Thompson, 1997, p. 139)

Those are just a few illustrations of the function of the outlaw journalist at work as a social critic and the form in which it took in Thompson’s letters from 1955-1967, as well as the decades that followed. These passages show the writer’s disdain for flawed political figures, his pessimism about the state of politics in the country, and an outlaw journalist’s penchant for making criticism personal and magnified via the use of dramatic and electric language. Thompson’s flair for the dramatic flowed through his writing, which was congealed with absurd or fictional situations and claims that advanced his narratives as an outlier critic.

Identifying as a Freakish Outlier

Finally, Thompson portrayed himself as marginalized to appeal to others who identified in similar ways. He was not necessarily a loner, but frequently positioned himself as a loner archetype with which other aspiring loners could identify. While in the Air Force in 1956, Thompson wrote to a friend and mentioned straying from the norm, writing: “I’ve individualized myself to the point that people don’t quite know what to make of me anymore (Thompson, 1997, p. 31). In 1957, he told his mother in a letter that the Colin Wilson book *The Outsider* would help

her better understand him and his future self, a feeling he transferred into the form and function of his role as an outlaw journalist in a deliberate way through acts designed to highlight his individuality (Thompson, 1997). In addition, he remarked to a friend in a letter later that year regarding the extremes he went, both in behavior and via formal requests, to earn an early discharge from his military post, saying about the flurry of action:

It demonstrates, probably more clearly than any other single incident in my life—just how far I’ve strayed from the popular ideologies of our time. To go back—or to hesitate—would be unthinkable. And yet, in going on, I can see that I shall be permanently apart from all but a small and lonely percentage of the human race, in all but the most superficial respects. (Thompson, 1997, p. 68)

Thompson would parlay actions such as those into the outlaw persona he exhibited as a professional writer, with his behavior and prose functioning to solidify his position in that specific genre.

From a rhetorical standpoint, Thompson’s positioning as an outlaw helped to frame himself as a truth-teller who was uncontaminated by the problems and structures he addressed. While he would insert himself into his work via the use of “Gonzo” journalism as an active participant in his prose, Thompson’s rhetorical positioning, as a free-thinking observer victimized by powerful establishments and hegemonies, was important because it allowed him to comprehensively critique. He championed free will and a person’s right to make their own decisions, writing to the Athenaeum Literary Association in 1957: “A man who lacks the ability to think for himself is as useless as a dead toad, while the thinking man has all the powers of the universe at his command” (Thompson, 1997, p. 49). Thompson said people should make the goal conform to the individual rather than the individual conforming to the goal, illustrating his use of

individualism as a rhetorical tool (Thompson, 1997, p. 121). He also said, “We strive to be ourselves” and not an occupation and that the ability to use free will to define our goals is paramount to existence (Thompson, 1997, p. 118). In another letter from 1958, Thompson said the security of conformity and the freedom of individuality are two ideals that are incompatible, and the difficult part is choosing between the two (Thompson, 1997). To Thompson, conformity was a dreadful concession to be avoided at all costs. He treasured the sovereignty that came with individualism because it positioned him outside the system he was criticizing and that distance insulated him enough to allow for the judgment he delivered. Irony was a byproduct of his focus on the individual, however, as his emphasis of the power of the individual created a paradox because other individuals who enjoyed identifying with Thompson as an individual created a collection of similarly minded individuals united by their ethos.

Conclusion

This chapter analyzed the three rhetorical markers of outlaw journalism: (1) positioning the rhetor as the defiant victim, (2) framing the rhetor as an outlier, and (3) deploying absurdity and exaggeration to deliver messaging. It did so through the lens of Hunter S. Thompson’s work, defining the principles and using examples from his writing to illustrate a prime example of the form and function of the genre in which he operated. It also demonstrated a trio of techniques common to outlaw journalism through Thompson-based examples that provided context about the function of the unique brand of journalism. Finally, it described the functions of the rhetorical form, including delivering criticism from the standpoint of the outsider, calling attention to

problems without necessarily offering solutions, and identifying the rhetor as a unique nonconformist who is routinely victimized by oppressors.

Thompson positioned himself as an obstinate victim in his writing through examples such as the California Highway Patrol traffic stop and through his interaction with the Chamber Music Society regarding a past-due notice. Secondly, Thompson's positioning of the rhetor as an outlier in society created a marginalization necessary to the outlaw genre, and his self-deprecating personal references were key in establishing that aspect of the outlier persona. In addition, the functions of the form of outlaw rhetoric mobilized the writer against the hegemonies and social flaws he loathed, with the rhetor's position on the outside allowing him a safer vantage point from which to aim his critiques. Finally, absurdity and exaggeration were Thompson's activation tools for his diatribes, as he fought real and imagined battles with publishing houses, creditors, and "liars" he regularly encountered. The aggrandized nature of his rhetoric served to magnify the victimhood he constructed, linking the first two techniques of outlaw journalism together naturally.

The concluding section of this project will review the theories, analyses, and constructs previously presented, as well as discuss Thompson's legacy, the effectiveness of his deployment of the form and functions of outlaw journalism, and the purposes of the rhetorical genre. In addition, it will examine future potential research subjects regarding Thompson, outlaw rhetoric, and genre creation, among others.

CHAPTER IV

Conclusion

This study focused on the genre of outlaw journalism through the lens of Hunter S. Thompson's writing, particularly his personal correspondence from 1955-1967. In doing so, it provided insight into the form and function of outlaw journalism. I identified the characteristics and rhetorical techniques of the genre of outlaw journalism, namely victimhood, the personification of the outlier identity and the use of absurdity and exaggeration. Those techniques functioned to illuminate wrongdoing, oppression, hypocrisy, and lies in society, especially within power structures and among those who had been elected or ascended to leadership positions within established hegemonies. The techniques also helped give a voice to those on the margins of society via well-known outlaw journalists like Thompson and also served as a spotlight on social plights and shortcomings in various facets of the country.

From an analytical perspective, Thompson's letters from the anthology *The Proud Highway: Saga of a Desperate Southern Gentleman 1955-1967* illustrate the young writer's construction of a rhetorical persona that would be a theme of his work the rest of his life. He exhibited all the techniques of outlaw journalism in his personal and public correspondence with family, friends, and contemporaries. The analysis portion of this study discussed the ways form and function are intertwined, namely how the intended function often dictates the rhetorical form that is deployed. Specifically, Thompson often played the role of uncompromising victim in his dispatches, elevated routine situations into the realm of the absurd, and positioned himself as the hapless goof or fringe-occupying freak rejected by mainstream society.

This analysis detailed three main functions of outlaw rhetoric: (1) positioning the rhetor as a defiant victim, (2) identifying the rhetor as an outlier on the fringe, and (3) using absurdity

and exaggeration to deliver messaging. The final technique provides a form for the other functions, arming the rhetor with amplified language that propels the writer's critical analysis and highlighting problems through vernacular peppered with electric adjectives. Creating victimhood enables the rhetor to rage against oppressors, both real and imagined, as the target of attacks, and the colorful, aggrandized language escalates the plight of the oppressed. By identifying as an outlier, the rhetor is able to distance himself from the organization or environment he is critiquing, a method that helps limit the writer's risk and provide the necessary distance from which to launch the bulbous barbs of criticism. These functions work in tandem with one another through the rhetor's construction and implementation methods, creating a triumvirate of techniques that can be successful with the rhetor's intended audience. Thompson did this to great effect throughout his career.

An Enduring Genre

Thanks to writers like Thompson, the genre of outlaw journalism continues to hold a vocal and vibrant thread in American society. Writers such as Chuck Palahniuk in fiction, political beat writers Charles P. Pierce of *Esquire* and Matt Taibbi of *Rolling Stone*, and television journalists like Jon Stewart on Comedy Central's *The Daily Show* are examples of figures whose work can fall into the outlaw genre, at least from a societal watchdog standpoint. *The Daily Show*, in particular, has had a profound impact on political journalism in the last two decades, blending news and entertainment to attract younger audiences with a fresh voice (Baym, 2005). Widely considered the model of outlaw journalism, Thompson and his legacy remain relevant. In February, *The New York Times* writer Billy Witz penned a longform piece titled, "The Super Bowl in Las Vegas: What Would Hunter S. Thompson Think?" that explored the city with which Thompson became forever attached in the 1970s as it prepared to host the

Super Bowl (Witz, 2024). In addition, writers who cover politics often postulate about what Thompson might think and write about in the era of Donald Trump, “fake news,” and venomously tilted partisan politics. In the modern day, pundits, pessimists, and prognosticators litter the scene, from the world of television and the printed word to the realm of podcasts and social media. The outlaw persona may have softened or become more commonplace in contemporary society, but it remains relevant while standing on the shoulders of pioneers like Thompson.

Shortcomings of Outlaw Journalism

As with any genre, outlaw journalism is not without its weaknesses. It is limited due to its tendency to highlight problems without suggesting solutions to those issues, instead favoring theatrics over substance. Thompson often played loose and fast with the truth, many times to the point of creating pure fiction, a problematic technique that likely cost the genre credibility once a transgression was identified. Late conservative radio host Rush Limbaugh in the 1980s and 1990s and current popular podcast host Joe Rogan can be classified in the same genre, especially as examples of rhetors gaslighting and overexaggerating problems without offering constructive or specific solutions, or by offering absurd suggestions based on off-the-wall innuendos, rumors, fear, or misinformation. Rhetors like Limbaugh and Rogan can use the form and function of outlaw journalism while not necessarily fulfilling its idealistic purposes. Scholars who have studied Limbaugh’s use of rhetoric maintain he employed tragic-frame discourse to escalate situations, was skilled in positioning himself as a leading voice of the conservative restorationist movement, and extolled the benefits of elevating the country’s capitalistic “superior class” to achieve his rhetorical and career goals (Appel, 2003). For rhetors like Limbaugh, constructing a narrative that presents the appearance of marginalization or victimization was highly successful

with the intended audience, even if that victimhood did not actually exist. Rogan, host of the *Joe Rogan Experience* that reached up to eleven million people, is an example of the destructive power of unchecked rhetorical deployment. Researchers contend that his narratives regarding the trans movement have not only given extremists an amplified platform with which to extoll their missives, but that his anti-trans rhetoric has helped perpetuate traditional conservative and oppressive hegemonic groups and effectively kept the trans community marginalized and victimized (Hsu, 2022). The genre's inability to serve as a catalyst for change in the world illustrates the hollow nature of its influence and power as a mechanism for societal progress, even in times when it serves to magnify controversy and public debate or focus attention on a particular subject. The examples of Limbaugh and Rogan take the genre's fallibility a step further, illustrating the negative effects it can have on marginalized groups and the ways their rhetoric can serve destructive purposes.

Thompson's unsuccessful bid to become Sheriff of Pitkin County, Colorado, in 1970 is a prime example of the guise of change-making masked by the genre's simplistic aim of pointing out problems without providing solutions. While living in Woody Creek, Colorado, outside Aspen, Thompson wrote an article titled "The Battle of Aspen" for *Rolling Stone* about his failure to unseat incumbent Sheriff Carrol Whitmire while running for the office under the "Freak Power" ticket. Thompson got the idea after covering the 1969 mayoral election in Aspen in which a nonconformist lawyer and biker named Joe Edwards ran for office, only to lose to a much more conservative candidate (Seymour & Wenner, 2007). His friends contend that Thompson's reporting of his election for Sheriff in 1970 was one hundred percent accurate and he was serious about the race, but Thompson's actions and public platform as a candidate suggest otherwise. Not only did he shave his head to "look like a cop," but Thompson wore a wig and

draped himself in an American flag on election night for dramatic effect (Seymour & Wenner, 2007, p. 106). His strategy was even more bizarre and absurd, as Thompson ran for the office on the platform of (1) sodding the streets of Aspen, (2) changing the city's name to "Fat City," (3) controlling drug sales by putting convicted drug dealers in "a bastinado platform and a set of stocks" on the courthouse lawn, (4) banning hunting and fishing for non-residents, (5) ensuring that the Sheriff and his deputies would never be armed in public, and (6) promising the Sheriff's office would savagely harass anyone committing land-grabs by buying large plots in town (Seymour & Wenner, 2007, p. 112). Thompson spoke seriously at times while referring to the election, but shifted his exaggerations into hyperdrive at the same time, a common technique of his as an outlaw writer that may have cost him votes in the end.

Conversely, solution journalism, most regularly represented through investigative practices, has long been an arbiter of change in America. Researchers have found that newsrooms across the country began showing an increasing interest in creating solutions journalism content during the last twenty years and that solutions-based articles, which highlight ways to eradicate or solve societal problems instead of simply point out their existence, resonated with readers in a more inspiring way than non-solutions articles (Curry & Hammonds, 2014). On the investigative side, investigative journalism has served as the tip of the spear of the fourth estate's role as societal watchdog. Television programs such as *Dateline*, *60 Minutes*, and *20/20* dedicated their efforts to spotlighting wrongdoing and oppression in America, and viewers have responded in ways that have brought about change in several arenas within society. The same can be said in other countries such as Great Britain, where researchers found investigative journalism effected real change in society, especially when media networks combined resources in collaborative investigative efforts (Konow-Lund, 2019). Even collegiate newspapers have

parlayed investigative reports into impactful change, including most recently with *The Daily Northwestern* at Northwestern University. In July 2023, the school paper reported incidents of hazing in its football program that resulted in the firing of head football coach Pat Fitzgerald and garnered national headlines from papers such as *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times*. That type of change may not have come about without the student paper's diligence and dedication to the truth. In short, solution and investigative journalism often achieve what outlaw journalism is incapable of due to its limitations.

Areas of Future Research

For both Hunter S. Thompson himself and the genre of outlaw rhetoric, there exists ample fodder for future research. Regarding Thompson, scholars could examine why he was the most popular writer to use this form of rhetoric or how his delivery and rhetorical construction helped align him with an immensely loyal following that elevated him to the level of icon. Was it simply due to happenstance that Thompson rose to prominence during a time of change, volatility, and uncertainty in America and therefore he had opportunities others did not? Or was it something more or different? In addition, researchers could explore the ways in which Thompson constructed his persona as a public figure and writer, the methods he employed to cultivate that persona after becoming one of the most well-known and celebrated writers in the nation, and the prisoner he became of his own construct.

Another compelling thesis might be to juxtapose Thompson's career and success in modern-day America, examining whether the impact he had as a leader in the outlaw journalist genre would be possible today. With endless television pundits going "against the grain" with the "hot take" and an army of social critics opining on podcasts on a daily basis, would his voice be swallowed in a sea of soliloquies? Today's media and entertainment landscape is more cluttered

and noisier than ever before; therefore, researchers could look into “hot take” culture and what is required in the modern age to cut through the noise, stand out among the crowd, and find an audience.

Research centered on the genre of outlaw journalism also could be extended from this project, with the methods utilized applied in various ways. From focusing on a specific medium such as television, radio and podcasts, or social media, scholars could examine similar themes in those realms. An additional analysis could center around the way different rhetors utilize the form of outlaw journalism, particularly ones who use it sparingly or switch back and forth between outlaw rhetoric and another style. Those rhetors would be a stark contrast to Thompson, who relied on the genre exclusively throughout his career. Other examinations of modern-day rhetors and how they have constructed their personas, especially in the realm of social media, could be compelling as well. Researchers also could examine identity creation via letter writing and how that may be achieved now that we are in the digital age where letters have become a rarity reserved for special occasions. As with many research exploits, the possibilities are seemingly endless.

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