

New Directions in Contemporary American Nonfiction*

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Çağdaş Amerikan Kurmaca-Dışı Yazınında Yeni Yönelimler

Abstract

Özet

This study explores contemporary American nonfiction's relationship to the twentieth century journalistic phenomenon of muckraking and to the more recent New New Journalism through a discussion of the acclaimed American novelist Nicholson Baker's selected works of nonfiction. Baker's nonfiction demonstrates serious and in-depth research, and in his refined, innovative treatment, investigative writing yields a narrative that is at once storytelling and ethical reflection as well as an expression of serious social, cultural, and political problems. This study contends that Baker inherits a commitment to the artistry of journalistic investigation and that he redefines the art of nonfiction through his subjective and ethical journalism that is conveyed through a refreshing literary reportage.

Bu çalışma çağdaş Amerikan romancısı Nicholson Baker'ın kurmaca-dışı eserlerinden bir seçkiyi inceleyerek çağdaş Amerikan kurmaca-dışı yazını ile yirminci yüzyıl araştırmacı gazeteciliği ve son dönem Yeni Yeni Gazetecilik akımları arasında bir bağlantı kurmaya çalışır. Baker'ın eserlerinde gözlemlenen derinlemesine inceleme ve sofistike yaklaşım sayesinde araştırmacı yazarlık, önemli sosyal, kültürel ve politik sorunların irdelenmesinin yanı sıra, hikaye anlatıcılığı ve etik düşünmenin bir araya gelmesi ile yenilenmiş olur. Bu açıdan değerlendirildiğinde, Baker'ın araştırmacı yazarlığı bir sanat biçimi olarak miras aldığı öne sürülebilir ve yazarın sunduğu yenilikçi anlatı biçimi ile kurmaca-dışı yazının öznel ve etik araştırmacılık bakımlarından yeniden tanımlandığı sonucuna ulaşılabilir.

Key Words: Nicholson Baker, Contemporary American Nonfiction, Digital Revolution, Print Books.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Nicholson Baker, Çağdaş Amerikan Kurmaca-Dışı Yazını, Dijital Devrim, Yazılı Basın.

1. Introduction

Although muckraking may seem a thing of the past and unconnected to the present historical juncture's literary production, it may offer a refreshing outlook for the assessment of contemporary American nonfiction's investigation oriented output. To note briefly, muckraking was a journalistic tradition of the early twentieth century. The works of the muckraker journalists, whose "investigations of social problems, government corruption, and corporate influence," have been helpful in fulfilling "the turn-of-the-century progressive reforms" (Hillstrom, 2010). Broadly speaking, muckrakers were journalists and muckraking was "the journalistic movement that

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exposed social, political, and ethical problems in the United States and generated public support for major reforms during the first decade of the twentieth century” (Hillstrom, 2010). They were interested in exposing “political corruption, mistreatment of workers, the plight of immigrants, and urban misery and decay” (Hillstrom, 2010). Coined in 1906—in a disapproving tone—by Theodore Roosevelt, “[t]he word is still used today in reference to American journalists who uncover evidence of corporate greed, government corruption, and other lawlessness” (Hillstrom, 2010). Laurie Collier Hillstrom argues that although “the American media underwent significant changes, investigative journalists [still draw] attention to some of the same issues that the muckrakers addressed almost one hundred years earlier” (p. 96). For instance, she proposes Eric Schlosser’s *Fast Food Nation* (2001) as the modern-day *The Jungle* (Sinclair Lewis, 1906) and considers the films of Michael Moore such as *Bowling for Columbine* (2002) as essentially muckraking.

Like Hillstrom, Robert Boynton, too notes that muckraking continues at present. Yet in his comprehensive outlook, Boynton proposes the emergence of a “new breed” of writers in twenty-first century whom he gathers under the rubric New New Journalism, a term that owes as much to American novelist Tom Wolfe’s notion of New Journalism as to muckraking itself (p. 28). Boynton’s brilliant argument in *New New Journalism: Conversations with America’s Best Nonfiction Writers on their Craft* (2005) refines the understanding of early muckraking movement by connecting it to the impressive development of American literary journalism in the twentieth century. He also assesses the influence of Tom Wolfe and the scope of his New Journalism within the larger tradition of American reportorial and literary journalism. Furthermore, his discussions tend toward a revision, or a better understanding, of the relationship between fiction and nonfiction, that is, the novels and reportorial or literary journalism of the last century in American letters.

Boynton’s book comprises of interviews he conducts with nineteen writers whose works he considers to form the New New Journalism movement. Among them are Gay Talese (b. 1932), Jane Kramer (b. 1938), Jon Krakauer (b. 1954), Lawrence Wright (b. 1947), Susan Orlean (b. 1955), Ted Conover (b. 1958), and Eric Schlosser (b. 1959). In his introduction to the book, Boynton provides a genealogy for this movement in two steps. First, he examines Tom Wolfe and New Journalism, and second, he looks at the historical and artistic development of journalism in America. In this way, Boynton posits a “dual heritage” for New New Journalism (Boynton, 2005). New New Journalists inherit from Wolfeian New Journalism and its more refined practitioners “the license to experiment with form” (Boynton, 2005). In point of fact, Boynton considers New Journalism “a truly avant-garde movement that expanded journalism’s rhetorical and literary scope by placing the author at the center of the story, channeling a character’s thought, using nonstandard punctuation, and exploding traditional narrative forms” (p. 12). He notes the works of Joan Didion, Norman Mailer, Truman Capote, and Michael Herr as notable examples of New Journalism.

However, while Wolfe’s journalism remains limited to reporting “surface” details that draw attention to class and “social status,” New New Journalist desire more “to address the social and

political concerns” (Boynton, 2005). That is to say, their approach to society is not limited to status and their particular approach to society comprises another methodological difference: “Contrary to the New Journalists, this new generation experiments more with the way one gets a story. To that end, they’ve developed innovative immersion strategies [... and] their most significant innovations have involved experiments with reporting, rather the language or forms they used to tell their stories” (Boynton, 2005). For instance, Ted Conover “work[s] as a prison guard [...] and live[s] as a hobo” for two different books; Leon Dash, Adrian LeBlanc, and Jonathan Harries spend years doing research for their narratives (Boynton, 2005). In this way, while for Wolfe reporting means “relentless accumulation of details that define an individual’s status,” New New Journalism reports the experience of reality, of the mundane existence (Boynton, 2005).

It is possible to say that Boynton’s celebration of the New New Journalism’s focus on “[s]ubcultures in general, impoverished subcultures in particular” proves to be a very significant contribution to American nonfiction (Boynton, 2005). The writers of the New New Journalism “view the disenfranchised not as exotic tribes, but as people whose problems are symptomatic of the dilemmas that vex America. There is an activist dimension in much of the New New Journalism, an element of muckraking and social concern” (Boynton, 2005). In this way, New New Journalism comprises “the literature of the everyday [, ...] drilling down into bedrock of ordinary experience, exploring what Gay Talese calls ‘the fictional undercurrent that flows beneath the stream of reality’” (Boynton, 2005). As Boynton explains, the works of the New New Journalists are “[r]igorously reported, psychologically astute, sociologically sophisticated, and politically aware” (p. 11).

They bring a distinct set of cultural and social concerns to their works. Neither frustrated novelists nor wayward newspaper reporters, they tend to be magazine and book writers who have benefited enormously from both the legitimacy Wolfe’s legacy has brought to literary nonfiction, and from the concurrent displacement of the novel as the most prestigious form of literary expression. When experimenting with narrative and rhetorical techniques, they conceive of themselves as working wholly within the nonfiction genre, rather than parsing the philosophical line between fact and fiction, as Norman Mailer and Truman Capote did with their nonfiction novels, *The Armies of the Night* and *In Cold Blood*. (Boynton, 2005)

In Boynton’s opinion, the basic premises of Wolfe’s New Journalism were established a century ago. More specifically, Boynton locates the true flowering of New Journalism (that Wolfe had in mind) in the work of the brilliant journalist Charles Dana in the 1880s: “Dana’s contribution was to combine a focus on the everyday with a concern for vivid, well-written stories. For Dana, a newspaper story was itself an art form” (p. 23). His newspaper, *The New York Sun*, “included reporters like Jacob Riis, who wrote about the New York slums he had inhabited for seven years, which lent *Sun’s* journalism a muckraking edge” (Boynton, 2005). Indeed, the term New Journalism gained currency around the days Dana started practice as a widely deployed method in many newspapers and the term “was used to describe the blend of sensationalism and crusading

journalism—muckraking on behalf of immigrants and the poor” (Boynton, 2005). Another important figure, Lincoln Steffens, “the city editor of the *New York Commercial Advertiser* in the 1890s,” proposed the emergence of a new genre, “literary journalism,” giving further importance to journalism (Boynton, 2005). Boynton explains, “Steffens made literary journalism—artfully told narrative stories about subjects of concern to the masses—into editorial policy, insisting that the basic goals of the artist and the journalist (subjectivity, honesty, empathy) were the same” (p. 24). Around the time Steffens made his proposition, the novelist Stephen Crane was writing literary journalism in many newspapers. “Among his contemporaries, Crane was one of the best to put Steffens’s vision into practice as he balanced the demands of literature and journalism in a manner that honored both” (Boynton, 2005). Soon, however, the prestige of journalism began to fade:

By the first decades of the twentieth century, the growing belief that newspapers should strive for objectivity left little room for literary journalism in their pages. Novelists [like Crane] were warned by Flaubert, Joyce, and others that writing journalism would harm their fiction, further diminishing journalism’s status in the literary world. The novel gradually took on what [the historian of American literary journalism, John C.] Hartsock calls a “cryptotheological aura,” a sense of importance and transcendence that journalism could never match. “The ‘fall,’ then, of journalism—and by extension narrative literary journalism—from literary grace was largely the result of the invention of high literature in the nineteenth century,” Hartsock argues (Boynton, 2005).

When Wolfe championed New Journalism in the late 1970s, “the literary hierarchy” was still in the above order and he was reviving—whether consciously or not—a valuable, albeit suppressed, method. In the sense that Wolfe reversed an unfair hierarchy, he can be seen as a hero with regard to the revival of literary journalism in America and for paving the way for the successful rise of what Boynton calls New New Journalism. In Boynton’s genealogy, therefore, we find the basic premises not only of what he proposes with the term New New Journalism but listen to a valuable mini lecture¹ on the interplay between fiction and nonfiction, the novelist and the reporter, in American literary history. As Boynton explains,

with their muckraking and intensive reporting on social and cultural issues, the New New Journalists have revived the tradition of American literary journalism, raising it to a more popular and commercial level than either its nineteenth- or late-twentieth-century predecessors ever imagined. The debates over “journalism” and “literature”—between “subjective” and “objective” reporting—weigh less heavily on this generation, freeing them to combine the best of both genres. Having done so without manifestoes or public debates, the New New Journalism has assumed a premier place in American literature (p. 30).

¹ The fact that Boynton is the director of graduate program in Journalism at New York University and a contributor and editor to various magazines like *Harper’s*, the *Atlantic Monthly*, and the *New York Times* lends more credit to his already insightful analyses.

How to proceed, then, with the premises of New New Journalism in mind and arrive at an understanding of contemporary American nonfiction that seems to have as strong affinities with the investigative journalist's eye for uncovering truth as with the literary journalist's penchant for bathing the reportorial in the beloved terrain of storytelling without forsaking truthful representation? In other words, how would literary journalism's inclination for "artfully told narrative stories about subjects of concern to the masses" relate to the present historical juncture's particular concerns that are conveyed through writing that manages to be both militant and muckraker-like, and ethically responsible and morally sensitive to large, albeit unknown, issues? (Boynton, 2005)

The nonfiction of the acclaimed contemporary American novelist Nicholson Baker seems to be a case in point in undertaking such inquiries. In this light, the importance of Boynton's analysis to this study is that a selection of Baker's nonfiction seems to bear similarity with New New Journalism Boynton describes. Like the New New Journalists' turn to the subcultures and the impoverished, Baker turns to the ignored, the neglected, the disrespected, and the uncared for. Like the New New Journalists' methods of extensive immersion and prolonged research, Baker spends very long periods doing research. What distinguishes Baker, however, is his topic, his actual subject, that comprises an unusual subculture that delineates an unlikely candidate for, or victim of, marginalization and reckless dismissal: libraries and books. In a series of magazine essays and a book regarding a major change in the library archiving systems that threatens to collapse civilization's print heritage, Baker reveals alarming fallacies and deceptions carried out on both governmental and local administrative levels. Working as a muckraker, he exposes the corruptions one by one; when his efforts are willfully thwarted, he exercises his legal right as a private citizen to be granted access to archives and goes to court. As a successful and acclaimed novelist, he revels in the literary possibilities of nonfiction and does not defer to a literary hierarchy that we observed above. Working diligently, sacrificing many years of his life to the cause of helping save the library's print heritage, Baker narrates the story of the loss of the library card catalogs, the destruction of old and rare books and newspapers: this is a personal, an ethical matter for Baker. It is not possible for him to let the demise of the library go unnoticed, unknown to the public, deliberately obscured by authorities. Besides his ethical concerns, his intellectual powers are at top speed: Baker thinks, cares, and offers discussions on the philosophical and moral bases of preserving the library heritage.

It would be great disservice to define Baker's achievement by explaining away his works as mere journalism due to the depth of his research and the accurately documented sources he has consulted. Yet it would be another instance of injustice if we do not acknowledge his contribution to American literary journalism by way of his exquisite nonfiction that not only offers new and revitalizing energies through its ethical and intellectual scope, ambition, and achievement but also perhaps perfecting the methods of the nonfiction writer in his treatment of a subject in a mind-bendingly accurate way that is simultaneously philosophically and ethically defended and detailed.

Furthermore, the accomplishment of Baker also counteracts a dire situation in American letters: a pervasive anti-intellectualism. Many critics have recently been referring to a perceived sense of anti-intellectualism in America—mostly as a factor in literature’s diminishing importance under the negative impact of political factors. “What can criticism and theory do,” W. J. T. Mitchell asks, “to counteract the forces of militarism, unilateralism, and the perpetual state of emergency that is now the explicit policy of the U.S. government? [...] What good is intellectual work in the face of the deeply anti-intellectual ethos of American public life?” (p. 327). In a similar tone, novelist Raymond Federman remarks,

[i]t is a recognized fact that the United States is an anti-intellectual² nation, a nation of pop culture, a nation that prefers easy spectacle to self-reflection, entertainment rather than art, and consequently it is difficult for writers not only to be taken seriously but even to have access to the sociopolitical arena. It is easier, in America, for a former football or basketball player, or even a wrestler, easier for a second-rate movie star to become involved in the political process and influence the course of history than it is for a writer or an intellectual. The people of the United States distrust writers, especially when their work refuses to entertain—refuses to tell and retell the same old story the same old way. This raises crucial questions about the role of American writers in the face of the great changes that are taking place in the world today. In this sense one could say that American writers, as far back as the early colonial days, have always been Fallen Prophets. Whitman and Melville (certainly the two greatest American writers of the nineteenth century) were indeed Fallen Prophets (pp. 219-20).

The role of the American writer, as evinced in the literary activity (or should we say, activism) of Baker, would be to engage with whatever difficulty one sees through continued and responsible treatment. It is possible to say that Baker proceeds determinedly to clarify important issues that need to be clarified, to bring to light unknown but crucial facts of life, to invite the reader to care, to think, and feel morally responsible. His invitations are valuable because who could be a better example than the writer whose ethical and intellectual pre-eminence is both admirable and, as we experience while reading, delightfully contagious in that he makes us ask ourselves: What is life but the life of the mind that contemplates, cares, loves, questions everything about the human, and communicates these concerns? In some sense, Baker may even seem to be a revolutionary of sorts; championing human virtue, cautiously defending intellectual traditions, the (van)guard of the print culture, the forerunner, as it were, of a newly-emerging counterculture that tries to protect our print heritage against some encroaching, devouring digitalism. In other words, the significance of Baker’s nonfiction that weds muckraker-like journalism with a New New Journalistic sensibility is that he reconfigures not only the scope, the form, and ambition of nonfiction based on reporting and narrating but also reinforces the need for the humanistic stance and the caring as

2 For a discussion on intellectualism in America, see Richard Posner’s *Public Intellectuals: A Study of Decline* (2001), John Michael’s *Anxious Intellectuals: Academic Professionals, Public Intellectuals, and Enlightenment Values* (2000).

well as the daring moral courage of the writer for our contemporary world. In reading his nonfiction that deals primarily with the destruction and transformation of centuries-old librarianship traditions, we bear witness, simultaneously, to a new direction in contemporary American fiction with regard to the function and mission of literature, and realize new vistas for the range any literary investigation could traverse. Put differently, Baker's meticulous investigations, his elegant narration of the facts he learns, his fierce and determined exposé of corruptions, and his determinedly ethical standpoint refresh our understanding of contemporary American nonfiction.

2. Nicholson Baker and the Counterculture of Print

As multifaceted as human civilization is, so are our attempts at simultaneously preserving and destroying it. The intellectual heritage of humanity stored in the archives of books and newspapers seems to come under severe attack since the mid-twentieth century, and it has an unlikely enemy as Nicholson Baker demonstrates in his exposé of the corporational underbelly of the so-called technological evolution of the information age. Baker's unique interest in and devotion to exploring the ins and outs of this matter, and his innovative methodological approach to the subject at hand effortlessly demand attention and assessment.

In three pieces of nonfiction, "Discards" (1994), "Truckin' for the Future" (1996), and the award-winning *Double Fold: Libraries and the Assault on Paper* (2001), Baker reveals how the trend toward information culture is turning libraries into centers of info-capitalism and turning readers and researchers into customers. In the meantime, card catalogues are ruthlessly destroyed in the name of the—allegedly—progressive dictates of computerization; print archives of historical legacy, rare and out of print books, centuries-long runs of journals and newspapers, once digitized, are simply thrown out on the pretense that they have completed their life cycles. Baker reveals the unknown side of the library revolution in the mode of a muckraker whose primary obligation is responsibility to our print heritage. The wonderful novelist that he is, Baker easily grips the reader in his nonfiction through narrative coherency and masterful storytelling. The fact that Baker turns not to better known albeit ignored facts of our moral daily lives of social, cultural, or political significance but instead turns perhaps to the most silenced of all voices, that is, libraries, print books and card catalogs in the digital age, seems to become more important in its range and vision when we acknowledge Baker's work on libraries, books, and card catalogs as the prime example of a new direction in contemporary American nonfiction.

Therefore, the following argument aims to read Baker's admirable literary renditions of arduous investigative work on the plight of the print in the face of the digital as the assertion of a legitimate idea, or theory, if you will, on the ethical stance of the contemporary writer and the wide horizons for contemporary nonfiction such stance offers. Baker's practice, in other words, may comprise a theory for us: in his example, we recognize the inherent assumption of what nonfiction is to do, which is, represent reality in a highly subjective manner that remains the subjectivity of author's all the way yet one that draws its striking appeal and convincing power from the

well-defined, well-defended, and well-documented ethical bearing of a storyteller that knows how to be humanistic, universal, non-totalizing, non-dogmatizing, and just all at the same time.

To begin, in “Discards,”³ Baker discusses the dubious merits of the digital revolution libraries are undergoing, and the essay comprises a preliminary argument that Baker extends into book form in *Double Fold*. Almost all the information Baker presents derives from his interviews with the central agents of the revolution such as librarians of both administrative and clerical positions. He visits many university libraries, such as Cornell, Harvard, Berkeley, as well as digitization staff with whom universities entrust their entire card catalogues. He interviews library staff of all levels, investigates the transcription processes into microfilm from beginning to end, and reports his findings with the proper, verifiable documentations of names, places, and dates as well as the accompanying justifications of digitization wherever due. The essay opens with a scene of strange ado for a strange event: a university library celebrates its transition from the centuries-long tradition⁴ of card cataloging to online cataloging in 1985. The t-shirt of a librarian reads, “The Great Discard”; another librarian ceremoniously unloads a drawer of cards to “a trash can decorated with colored paper” while hundreds of balloons float with cards hanging from their strings (Baker, 1996). At another university, “the card catalog was ceremonially put out of its misery by an official who pointed a gun at it and ‘shot’ it” (Baker, 1996). In yet another university, “a mock wake,” complete with “veils,” “hymns,” and “flowers” is held for the discarded library card catalogue (Baker, 1996). Baker finds it interesting that cards should—or could ever—be disposed of with such “glee” as the antiquated instruments of the past, long overdue at their service, and a burden on the library (Baker, 1996). Especially since what replaces them remains far from being good substitutes because the online library catalog, in its earliest phase in late-eighties and early-nineties is so inefficient and prone to mistakes that it only turns a faultless research system into one full of faults and misdirection.

The process of discarding requires that cards be microfilmed or transcribed into computer databases manually. After that, if possible, they are recycled as waste paper, or else, “thrown out” (Baker, 1996). The crucial thing is that microfilming is “a luxury few libraries can afford” if they are not “funded with federal grants [such as Title II-C grants] and large private gifts” (Baker, 1996). Therefore, card catalogues are mostly transcribed by corporations into computer database systems for considerable fees, and then, at the request of libraries, discarded, whether ceremoniously as we mentioned above, or by the digitizing company. OCLC, formerly Ohio College Library Center and now Online Computer Library Center, is the most functional corporation of the international “information industry” that libraries trust their catalogs to be digitized with (Baker,

3 The essay was published originally in the *New Yorker* in 1994, and is collected in Baker’s 1996 collection of essays, *The Size of Thoughts: Essays and Other Lumber*, to which this study refers.

4 The origins of card cataloging goes back to 1791, when the French “Revolutionary government, having confiscated a number of private and monastic libraries throughout France, became curious to know what interesting books it suddenly possessed” (Baker, 1996, p. 142). The primary details of each book were written on “ordinary playing cards,” and “aces and deuces” were saved “for books with wordy titles” (Baker, 1996, p. 142).

1996, p. 129). In his frequent visits to OCLC, Baker realizes that OCLC takes its business very seriously yet employs staff that lacks basic traditional card cataloging education, or as Baker calls it, “the intricacies of the cataloger’s art” (Baker, 1996). Well-learned in the librarian’s craft, Baker lists what any competent cataloger, traditional or now computerized, needs to have full command of: “the Dewey decimal system”; “the Sears List of Subject Headings”; “Cutter numbers”; “the abbreviational niceties of the International Standard bibliographic Description (ISBD) format” (Baker, 1996). Chances are slim for the young, mostly temporary staff of OCLC working in tiresome shifts to have command of these systems perfected by decades of expertise and practice. The price the digitized catalog shall pay seems self-evident: conflation of author names, missing subject headings and notes for “See Also” and “Related Subjects.” Libraries should remain “paper environments,” not technology environments, Baker warns us (Baker, 1996). A greater warning comes in “Truckin’ for the Future.”⁵

When librarians notify Baker-the-library-enthusiast and the self-proclaimed “preservationist,” on some dire constraints San Francisco Public Library is going through, Baker embarks on a project that would become one of the best investigative journalisms in his career (Baker, 2012). Baker is not exactly a journalist let alone an investigative journalist. Nevertheless, the methods he employs when thinking about and researching a subject matter for an essay in progress, when combined with his intellectual and ethical zeal, may effortlessly produce unique works that connect him to the muckrakers of the past and the New New Journalists of the present. In “Truckin’ for the Future,” Baker reveals “the real story” behind the electronic revolution the libraries are undergoing (Baker, 2012).

In 1996, San Francisco Public Library, directed by Kenneth Dowlin,⁶ moves to a new handsome building, “a large gray structure with a hole in the middle where the stacks should be” (Baker, 2012). In the years leading up to the move which Dowlin himself proposes, the library, its holdings, and its function go through major changes, unbeknownst to many who would be concerned. Baker fills us on the details he has learned with great care and attention. To begin, the story of the move, as Baker reveals, is one of deception and manipulation: “The construction [of the new library building] was financed with more than a hundred million dollars in public money: the voter approved this munificent bond issue because the old [library], they were told, couldn’t hold what it was asked to hold” (2012). When, however, thirty-one librarians of San Francisco Public Library see the construction details of the new building, and with admirable insight and intellect, if not work ethic and personal moral responsibility, detect a grave problem: the space the new building proposes reserves too little for shelf space and offers an abundance of “floor space,

5 The essay was published originally in the *New Yorker* in 1996, and is collected in Baker’s 2012 collection of essays, *The Way the World Works*, to which this study refers.

6 The title of the essay is the catch phrase of Dowlin’s (failed) campaign for the presidency of American Library Association in 1987 (Baker, 2012, p. 116). Also worth noting is that Dowlin is a former Marine Corps, and a part-time bookmobile driver before he ventures on the world of library administration, a very unlikely, or so it would seem, background for his revolutionary librarianship in Baker’s estimate.

or atrium space” (Baker, 2012). In their letter to Kenneth Dowlin, the library staff remind the administration of this unpleasant fact, and even go on to claim that “the current plan for the new building is not meeting the needs set forth to voters to justify the expenditure” (Baker, 2012). It takes four years for the library administration to heed the warnings. Prior to the move to the new building, the administration orders “weeding” in haste, a routine but vigilant, long process in library practice, which means the careful selection and discarding of extra and unused, copies, or books damaged beyond repair (Baker, 2012). Not surprisingly, the care and expertise weeding requires is unheeded, too, and an incredible number of books is discarded to downsize the library’s archive until it fits the new building.

While books leave the library in crippling numbers in trucks that come every other day, some librarians start what they call “guerilla librarianship” until “the library comes to its senses” (Baker, 2012). They stamp due-dates on non-circulating books and rescue them from discard, they delay or refuse to weed: they “have saved thousands of books by the sly, quietly transferring them from one department to another, hiding them in their lockers. They reintroduce these books when the danger has passed” (Baker, 2012). Baker’s other findings prove no less heartbreaking and alarming. Upon exploring the new building, for instance, Baker discovers many librarianship routines other than weeding that are abused. Baker visits the otherwise restricted but now unsupervised staff-only book sorting room in the new library building. The customary way of sorting returned books is to “slid [them] down a chute into the sorting room in plastic bins: a simple, durable system” (Baker, 2012). The new building, however, uses “a motorized conveyor belt [that] pulls the books down the chute one at a time, and when they jam, they get hurt. It’s as if you sent your clothes down to the luggage handlers in the airport without putting them in a suitcase. Hundreds of books have been torn and injured this way” (Baker, 2012). What is more, this new sorting room lacks both the conventional shelves a sorting room holds and the staff responsible for shelving them in the sorting room. As a result, Baker observes, “at least forty thousand books currently await reshelving” as they are stacked carelessly, in odd angles, in disorderly stacks on the floors, suffering from some more damage to their spines and covers (2012). “The sorting room is like the entire new library,” Baker concludes, “in that it has built into it a contempt for, at least an indifference to, literary culture and requirements” (2012).

The card catalog of the library, as would be expected, never makes it to the new building, and remains at the old building and waits for the completion of full digitization before it is destroyed. Librarians plead Baker to “save” the catalog and Baker “agree[s] to keep it intact” (Baker, 2012). First, he makes “a formal request under the Public Records Act to inspect the card catalog” hoping that the “legalistic demarche would” clarify the catalog’s position as “public document, and temporarily” delay its destruction as “surplus property” (Baker, 2012). When his request is denied, Baker “sue[s] for legal access” and not only is he granted access but also the city’s Library Commission “vote[s] to find a way to keep it” (Baker, 2012). Baker later makes another formal request to be presented with the library’s “Withdrawal Register” since 1897. In the request, he writes, “[s]urely there is a record of the disposition of million dollars’ worth of city property”

(2012). The response to the request which turns into “Exhibit D *Baker vs. San Francisco Public Library*” denies such comprehensive records other than a list of books removed between 1995 and 1996. Even a study of this poor list reveals massive loss: many “last copies and hard-to-find books” were discarded, including works by “Muriel Spark, Goethe, and William Dean Howells,” the last copy of a 1901 edition of Charles Darwin’s *The Movements and Habits of Climbing Plants*, and “an appalling number of research-level monographs in the sciences” (Baker, 2012).

As part of his investigation, Baker spends a month crosschecking cards with their online catalogs and notices incredible lapses and absences in database entries. The digitization process, carried out by corporations and funded by government, is supposed to have been faultless since its truly expensive expert services have liquidated the library’s generous share of the city budget. Here is the crux of the matter:

The real story is about what happens—what to a greater or lesser degree is happening in a number of cities around the country—when telecommunications enthusiasts take over big old research libraries and attempt to remake them, with corporate help, as high-traffic showplaces for information technology. Such transformations consume unforecastably large sums of money, which is why the [San Francisco Public Library] found itself [...] essentially broke, with a one-million-dollar deficit in its operating budget, its new building annotated and beflagged with the names of major benefactors who enabled it, just barely, to open its doors (Baker, 2012).

These benefactors have complex relationships with libraries, and have curious plan with regard to libraries. To illustrate, Pacific Telesis Group is a corporate benefactor of San Francisco Public Library and it “wants to become a ‘content provider’ in the growing fee-for-service information business” (Baker, 2012). The person that presides over this company provides the same services for the San Francisco Library Commission—an official position in the government—and believes in “informational connectivity” (Baker, 2012). Likewise, Kenneth Dowlin, “the city librarian,” has plans to turn the library into a “telecommunications utility” by installing his own remote electronic access software, and if it is accepted, he notifies, “I get my five percent” (Baker, 2012). Dowlin has a point, it is a lucrative business indeed: “Last year, the entrepreneurial [San Francisco Public Library] launched Library Express, a service that charged sixty dollars an hour to clients who needed, and could afford, a higher level of research assistance and document retrieval than the unpaying patron” (Baker, 2012). Lucrative, besides brand new, one should say: the function of the library is redefined and its services categorized and price-tagged accordingly, while creating itself a niche market for “clients” seeking “content.”

Of course it would have been possible to ignore these technological developments in library science, Baker insists, were these people also not destroying the actual books on the library shelves. During the course of the move to the new building, Kenneth Dowlin has “sent more than two hundred thousand books to a landfill—many of them old, hard to find, out of print, and valuable” (Baker, 2012). Probable candidates are the books that Baker would not find in the online catalog. Baker learns these facts from librarians who want their names undisclosed because “Dowlin has a

way, some assert, of punishing dissidents by exiling them to branch duty (a charge the administration has denied)” (Baker, 2012). These anonymous rebels, or more possibly, heroes, of San Francisco Public Library believe that “their library was undergoing a kind of brain surgery” and as one of them puts it, “its EEG⁷ is going flat” (Baker, 2012).

Baker is deeply troubled with the loss of card catalogs and the discarded books, and we shall find him in *Double Fold* himself purchasing the card catalog of an entire library to save it from destruction. His criticism of the library’s claims to so-called space limitation in excusing discard of books and catalogs can also be observed in “If Libraries Don’t Do It, Who Will?”⁸ (2001), which is Baker’s commemoration of the opening ceremony of a new library at Duke University. Praising Duke University for their exemplary attitude toward storing and valuing books against the widespread national tendency to downsize library spaces through digitization, Baker reiterates his argument from another perspective: The country is full of huge buildings; there are enough big buildings reserved for storing “cheese products, or truck parts, or Happy Meal toys, or Pentium computers that will be scrap in five years” or even “laundry” (Baker, 2012). Authorities, however, “inflate the cost of keeping things, and they denigrate the durability of paper, because it’s distressing to them that it is so inexpensive to store what was long ago bought, cataloged, and shelved” (Baker, 2012). Therefore, when it comes to the huge and ever-expanding collections of libraries, every effort is made at “squeezing” print material into microfilms; impressive amounts of money is spent on “digital projects” that doubles or triples the actual storage expenses libraries would need (Baker, 2012). Libraries cannot, by principle, operate on “reformatted” material; nor can they trust “businesses” and corporations to carry out a task of such importance (Baker, 2012). Further, it is a paradox that keeping a book in a library costs the library much less than its digitization does. As in his previous essays, Baker is motivated as much through his love of and respect for books and belief in the importance of preserving them as with a desire to expose the corporational and governmental forces at work in destroying an immense part of human civilization forever.

What we glimpse in “Discards,” “Truckin’ for the Future,” and “If Libraries Don’t Do It, Who Will?” culminates in *Double Fold* which is Baker’s most extensive treatment of the topic in his decades-long struggle with raising public and private awareness with regard to the fallacies and deceptions of digital revolution. In thirty-eight short chapters titled wittily, for instance, “It Can Be Brutal,” “Destroying to Preserve,” “Dingy, Dreary, Dog-eared, and Dead,” the book witnesses a massive project of destruction in about three hundred pages. There is also an *Index, References*, and three high-quality reproductions of colored photographs of six richly illustrated newspaper spreads and one sheet’s astonishingly unsuccessful microfilm image, and a *Notes* section that offers 257 notes for citations for the people and materials Baker quotes from. A work of immense passion, serious investigation and documentation, *Double Fold* brings Baker the prestigious National Book Critics Circle Award for nonfiction in 2001.

7 Electroencephalogram, recording of electrical activity of the brain.

8 The essay is collected in Baker’s 2012 collection of essays *The Way the World Works*. Paranthetical references refer to the collection.

While we may further read about Baker's love-affair with the exquisiteness of books and newspapers in essays like "The Times in 1951" (2001) and "Reading the Paper" (2002), which are both collected in *The Way the World Works*, it is only in the Preface to *Double Fold* that we find the origins of Baker's passionate defense of libraries. In 1993, the *New Yorker* commissions Baker for an essay. Baker plans to write "a brief, cheerful piece about the appeal of card catalogues" (2001). "I began talking to librarians around the country," Baker explains, "and I found out that card catalogs were being thrown out everywhere. I grew less cheerful, and the essay grew longer" (Baker, 2001). This essay is "Discards" that was discussed above, which qualified Baker as a "library activist" in the eyes of many librarians (Baker, 2001).

Baker's concentration on card catalogues in "Discards" does not immediately grant him the awareness of a far greater catastrophe that *Double Fold* reveals. As he tells in "Truckin' for the Future," the librarians in San Francisco who plead him for help actually tip him on the massive book-discarding policy of libraries. *Double Fold* is also based on the chasing of a lead. The events Baker reports in "Truckin' for the Future" creates a stir⁹ in San Francisco and an old man named Bill Blackbeard informs Baker on further shocking news. What Blackbeard tells is so completely shocking that Baker fails to "comprehend"

that the Library of Congress, the purported library of last resort, had replaced most of its enormous collection of late-nineteenth- and twentieth-century newspapers with microfilm, and that research libraries were relying on what [Blackbeard] called "fraudulent" scientific studies when they justified the discarding of books and newspapers on the basis of diagnosed states of acidity and embrittlement. (Baker, 2001)

Two years later, Baker begins investigating these leads and what is planned as another article for the *New Yorker* expands and turns into *Double Fold*.

One could argue that an ardent lover of books and literature who cherishes their material peculiarities and beauties to the point of obsession, a treasurer of literary culture who believes in the preservation of every bit of written history as much as possible such as Baker would not have been hard pressed to react in the way he did. He is so frustrated and desperate that he ends up writing extensively and diligently about the unknown controversies surrounding the deliberate destruction of the cultural and intellectual history of the country. At we witness in the above essays and as we shall see shortly, Baker's reactions to violations of books and libraries may ultimately point out his rightful mistrust on the ethical and intellectual judgment one would normally expect from experts and authorities on delicate matters.

Double Fold takes libraries to task for converting original print materials of historical value on a deceptive, if not completely untrue, hypothesis since 1950. Libraries and microfilm companies carry out aggressive propaganda on the imminent loss of nearly all old books and newspapers to

9 The reaction *Double Fold* receives from librarians yields various controversial responses and reviews. See Lynch (2003), Orr (2002), and Pavelka (2002).

some alleged paper damage that they prove with unreliable tests. It is claimed that all paper made of “ground-wood pulp”¹⁰ will “crumble into dust” in the very near future. Therefore, the argument is on behalf of preserving print documents by microfilming them before their paper disintegrates (Baker, 2001). Baker cannot be convinced, because, intent on finding evidence of such disintegrating paper, his searches in the libraries yield no example of disintegrating paper. Furthermore, there is no approved scientific study on the life of paper: “there has never been a long-term study that attempted to plot an actual loss-of-strength curve for samples of naturally aging newsprint, or indeed for samples of any paper” (Baker, 2001). Yet, microfilming has to have some justification and the justifications have to be scientifically proven:

In the absence of real long-term data, predictions have relied on methodologically shaky “artificial aging” (or “accelerated aging”) experiments, in which you bake a paper sample in a laboratory oven for a week or two and then belabor it with standardized tests. [...] But the results of these sorts of divinatory calculations, invoked with head-shaking gravity by library administrators, have been uniformly wrong, and they are now viewed with skepticism by many paper scientists. (Baker, 2001)

The book’s title refers to one of these tests where the edge of a book page is repeatedly folded from the exact same point until paper breaks from use. The fold test is specifically designed to announce the onset of the “apocalypse of paper” and thereby to promote the discarding of books, which was not to begin until the space-killing newspapers were sent away after microfilming (Baker, 2001, pp. 143, 33). A particular piece of paper’s success in the fold test determines the numbers of years it can survive in the library before it disintegrates due to “inherent vice” (Baker, 2001). A typical folding test for a paperback book from the 1900s declares the most likely lifespan for that book as twenty-five years and microfilming is highly encouraged to preserve these imperiled books. Yet, in a couple of years after the fold test begins to send books and newspapers to discard, scientists prove that the fold test is unreliable, and for Baker it is nothing but “an instrument of deception, almost always of self-deception” at the service of libraries intent on opening up space (2001, p. 146, 161). As a scientist clarifies, the fold test could only be used on paper whose usage requires that it be folded frequently by users and sometimes by design, such as “bank notes and maps,” and a fold test on books bears no resemblance to actual use where readers turn rather than fold pages, and that this test cannot determine the endurance of paper, the necessity and urgency of microfilming, nor the discarding of books or newspapers (Baker, 2001).

Baker’s purpose in revealing these seemingly calculated pretenses is to take libraries to task for their deceptive reformatting and microfilming policies. For instance, the British Library of London, home to the biggest archive of international newspapers, has been suffering from storage trouble since 1996 and has been “rid[ding] itself” of millions of volumes of the world’s best

10 The 2002 Vintage copy of *Double Fold* used in this study seems to be printed on ground-wood pulp paper with a texture of visible fibers, the not so smooth but beautifully yellowish pages.

collections. Brian Lang, the library's director, informs Baker that "[t]he intention is that runs of newspapers for which no bids have been received will be pulped" (Baker, 2001). The U. S. Library of Congress "reject[s] everything" British library offers them, including precious archives of U.S. newspapers, while the American Antiquarian Society accepts some collections that cover the Civil War era (Baker, 2001). Terrified at the idea of these newspapers being pulped, slashed down to their flakes by machines, Baker "hastily form[s] a non-profit corporation" since a private citizen cannot bid on library discard auctions, and rents a warehouse with his personal savings (2001). Via his non-profit "American Newspaper Repository" corporation, Baker starts bidding on the British Library's discards. Grand as his efforts may seem, they have an indisputable rationale:

If American libraries had been doing the job we paid them to do, and innocently trusted that they were doing, over the past five decades—if they had been taking reasonable care of our communal newspaper collections rather than stacking them in all the wrong places, and finally selling them to book-breakers or dumping them in the trash outright (an employee of one Southern library recently rescued from a Dumpster, and successfully resold to a dealer, a run of Harper's Weekly worth ten thousand dollars)—then the British Library's decision to auction off millions of pages of urban life, although it would mark a low point of cultural husbandry, would not have been such a potentially disastrous loss to future historians. Fifty years ago, after all, there were bound sets, even double sets, of all the major metropolitan dailies safely stored in libraries around the United States. (Baker, 2001)

Intent on making public the grandiosity of this loss, Baker belaboriously lists all the major libraries and the collections they have discarded on the way to becoming depositories of microfilmed versions of these documents.

The role of government policies turns out to be surprisingly supportive of this destructive policy, if not outrightly encouraging. For instance, the National Endowment for the Humanities has been carrying out a specially funded U.S. Newspaper Program since 1985. The purpose of the project is, first, to catalogue U.S. newspapers as much as possible and second, to convert these newspapers into microfilm. The program "has given libraries about forty-five million dollars in so-called preservation money—and zero dollars for storage space" (Baker, 2001). In fact, the program

makes no requirement that libraries actually preserve, in the physical sense of 'reshelve,' their originals after they have been sent out for federally funded filming. The effect of all this [National Endowment for the Humanities] microfilm money has been to trigger a last surge of discarding, as libraries use federal preservation grants to solve their local space problems. Not since the monk-harassments of sixteenth-century England has a government tolerated, indeed stimulated, the methodical eradication of so much primary-source material. (Baker, 2001)

The determining role of individual local government officials is another crucial factor since the city librarian and the library administration may cooperate in saving not only their but also other

libraries' archives. Something to this effect has taken place in Boston Public Library where the library's "curator of microtexts and newspapers," Charles Longley and the city Librarian Philip McNiff have worked together not only to preserve the city library's collections but also salvaged newspapers from among Harvard's discards (Baker, 2001). The opposite example has been observed in "Truckin' for the Future" in Kenneth Dowlin's so-called revolutionary administration. It is sad to note that the positive example of Boston Public Library is limited to a few other efforts and besides their recoveries, "the annihilation of once accessible collections of major daily papers of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries is pretty close to total" (Baker, 2001). This, in Baker's opinion, is nothing more than the intentional erasure by a country of its own history by destroying its permanent records and replacing them with their barely mediocre replicas.

Baker's focus on newspapers is especially important because as the primary targets of the destructive operation of microfilming, they lose all their authenticity. He does grant microfilm its practical use and does not object to it in principle. Nevertheless, at least in 2001 when Baker writes the book, high-resolution image scanners were not available and black and white microfilming was at its best an average means of converting the vast sheets of newspapers heavily and vividly illustrated along with other non-reproducible features. As he explains,

the microfilming of old newspapers (which contain many thousands of woodcuts, by the way, not to mention Easter-egg cutouts, paper dolls, dress patterns, and illustrated sheet music) has, right from the beginning, been intimately linked with their destruction. The disbanding of every volume in order to speed production and avoid gutter shadow (the middle area of an open volume, where the pages turn down toward the binding, a region harder to light and keep in focus) has long been the preferred method of newspaper microphotography in the United States (2001).

No doubt the disbanded pages were not rebound; they had to be destroyed to be preserved, as it were, because of the ever-imminent paper disintegration as well as the grave problem of space (Baker, 2001).

Taking the American Library of Congress specially to task, Baker wonders, "[w]hy, one wants querulously to ask, is our national library so often in the throes of space crisis?" (Baker, 2001). Baker is discouraged to notice that "[a] year of daily paper would fill fifty-two volumes and occupy less than half the Barbie aisle in a Toys R Us" (2001). Somehow, however, Library of Congress seems to find it hard "to do what any steadily growing concern—a successful pet-food discounter, say, or a distributor of auto parts, or a museum of sculpture—manages to do year after year, without fuss" (Baker, 2001). It is a problem of "will," he concludes: "librarians have lied shamelessly about the extent of paper's fragility, and they continue to lie about it. For over fifty years they have disparaged paper's residual strength, while remaining 'blind as lover' to the failings and infirmities of film" (Baker, 2001). And, it has taken so long for these facts to be uncovered.

3. Conclusion

In conclusion, although technology has advanced to a point of perfection in terms of online and digital archiving, Baker's criticisms on library's discard policies should be considered as the reasonable worries of a humanist. As Geoffrey Galt Harpham writes,

[h]umanists operate on a human scale; they treat their subjects not as organisms, cells, or atoms, nor as specks of animate matter in the vast universe. Nor, for that matter, as clients, patients, customers, or cases. But as self-aware individuals conscious of their existence. Humanistic knowledge is centered in texts (in the broadest sense of the term) produced by human beings engaged in the process of reflecting on their lives. At the core of the humanities is the distinctively human capacity to imagine, to interpret, and to represent the human experience (1995).

Harpham sounds uncannily right when we consider his words within the context of our engagement with technology, or in Baker's defense of the preservation of the library, and the library's preservation of the archives of human history.

Baker uncovers corruption or misconduct regarding a very specific issue and his particular treatment of the intricacies of the so-called digital revolution lends his investigation-based narrative an ethical bearing that broadens the social and political reach of contemporary nonfiction. In this sense, Baker's nonfiction discussed in this study demonstrates serious and in-depth research, and in his exquisite conduct, investigation turns into a narrative that tells stories, performs ethical reflection, and offers a realistic narrative. Baker's achievement, although it may be built on the methods of other traditions, creates completely new opportunities for the American writer who is ethically bothered by some crucial social, cultural, and political problems, who is intellectually willing and competent to undertake a rigorous, meticulous, and extensive discussion and analysis of his or her topic. In this sense, Baker's works signal a path for the writer who feels compelled to respond to and raise consciousness for urgent but overlooked and dismissed facts. In a final analysis, it is possible to say that Baker turns nonfiction into an endeavor that addresses ethical questions in an intellectual manner. Above all, as a novelist, Baker affirms the function and mission of nonfiction to accumulate details of real life, narrate them in their unadorned factuality without succumbing to scientific objectivity but rather through subjectively foregrounding the social, cultural, and political significance of each fact he observes and reports.

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