Undercover Reporting

Hamill, Pete, Kroeger, Brooke

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Ted Conover was twenty when he delayed his last year of college to spend four months “hopping freight” across the western half of the United States to write about the last generation of American hoboes, placing himself at the far end of a long and fruitful vine of American writers who tramp dating back to the 1800s.

Conover’s adventure began in fall 1980, about five months after the Washington Post published Neil Henry’s wrenching twelve-part series about the DC area down-and-out. What Conover had in mind was more vagabond than vagrant, not a big city newspaper’s sharp local focus on a burgeoning and increasingly intractable social problem through the device of the reporter as derelict, which Henry had ably produced. This was to be Conover’s own ranging chronicle of HoBodom, as he both encountered and experienced it. He channeled as literary muses Jack London and George Orwell, John Howard Griffin, Jack Kerouac, and even Hermann Hesse. Conover admired Henry’s recent newspaper work, too, and before setting out on his own travels, made a point of seeking out the Post reporter for advice and affirmation.

The genius in stories such as these but on a variety of top-
ics—so prevalent in the late 1970s and 1980s—is the ability their writers demonstrated to insinuate themselves into the action as participant-observers, to gain the trust of chance companions and an invitation into the private-most aspects of their lives, not only to witness the dangers and hardships that beset them but to experience them, too, as they were being lived. “I self-identified as an American from the semi-urban West,” Conover recalled years later, “and considered the big city rescue missions on the East Coast to likely be the scariest places on earth; that made me extra-admiring of Neil.” Beyond that, he said, that Henry wrote for the Washington Post “and that they [the Post editors] endorsed his participatory approach heartened me, I would say—made me feel more confident about my own idea.”

On return from his travels, Conover’s confidence no doubt grew greater after completing the senior thesis in anthropology (“Between Freedom and Poverty: Railroad Tramps of the American West”) that inspired his quest. An Amherst student magazine published an episode from his travels, “A Morning with Pops,” which the college’s alumni magazine republished in 1981. The rest of this Conover anecdote sounds like a young writer’s dream sequence, but it is factual: The excerpt attracted the attention of a local reporter for the Associated Press, whose published interview with Conover in turn caught the attention of NBC’s The Today Show. The program featured Conover on a morning when the literary agent, Sterling Lord, happened to be watching. Lord then agreed to represent him. Viking published Rolling Nowhere: Riding the Rails with America’s Hoboes in January 1984, a book that propelled the young Conover into a career as writer-participant-observer in the kissing-cousin genres of undercover and immersion reporting.

Conover’s most significant personal asset for the project was not race but youth, like so many would-be tramps before him. He
was twenty-four by the time *Rolling Nowhere* was in its first printing and had already “crossed the country on my bicycle, worked in a Spanish sausage factory, done community organizing as a VISTA volunteer in inner-city Dallas and, of course, spent four months on the rails with hoboes.” To his dismay, the publisher positioned the book as the work of a naïf. Several major reviewers highlighted this too as the real charm of the book but also as its weakness, a view he also came to accept in time. “These are a young man’s adventures,” he writes in the preface to an edition of the paperback published in 2001.

His second book, *Coyotes*, published in 1986, detailed his experiences following undocumented Mexicans on their migratory path to the United States, men Conover later called “the new America hoboes.” The work grew out of some of his encounters during the reporting phase of *Rolling Nowhere* but also was inspired by a piece by John Crewdson in the *New York Times* that described a Mexican border crossing into Arizona. “The piece was written in the third person and I remember concluding that Crewdson had probably not done the actual crossing himself,” Conover recalled. “But why couldn’t a writer do that, I remember thinking, and why couldn’t that story be told dramatically, in the first person?”

This Conover outing was not to be undercover. It could not have been. Not even by dyeing his blond hair dark or by color correcting his blue eyes to brown—which he attempted—could Conover have passed for a campesino. Even in the same style of dress and baseball cap—there is a photograph of Conover and his companions arranged around what appears to be a campfire—his Dutch-Nordic features mark him. And even if he could have passed physically, although his Spanish was fluent, his accent would have given him away. Beyond that, as John Davidson and Dick
Reavis had found nearly a decade earlier, to be able to travel along, or shadow, required the explicit or tacit permission of everyone involved in the journey. The writers easily could have been border patrol spies; their very presence could put their companions at risk.

Sometimes trust was established in a hurry. Davidson, for instance, met Javier only hours before they both got on a bus for Mexico. But Davidson had the advantage of an introduction from a well-known activist who worked on behalf of illegal immigrants, which helped establish him as worthy. “I looked like a college grad,” he said. “Glasses, Brooks Brothers shirt. I didn’t look like I was in the border patrol. He could read me pretty easily. He was smart enough to know that I was all right.”

For encounters with other border-crossers and the coyotes, he and Javier cooked up a story about Davidson being Costa Rican to explain why he didn’t look Mexican, but he doesn’t recall ever having to use it. (Shades of Merle Linda Wolin’s pose as “Merlina,” the ostensible Brazilian sweatshop worker, for her sweatshop series in the *Los Angeles Herald-Examiner.*) “The real deception was between myself and my wanting to take myself out of the story and not have it be about me,” Davidson said. “Who I was deceiving was the reader.”

In a prologue to Davidson’s 1977 piece for *Texas Monthly*, he recounts how Javier agreed to be shadowed to Mexico and then back to San Antonio. “Then you would know what it’s like to be a wetback,” he told Davidson. “That way you could get the joke.” Conover met his companions while he already was in central Mexico. It had not been his plan to accompany them in this way, but after a Mexican farmer told him, “It is better to see once than to listen many times,” he became “intoxicated with the
idea of experiencing a crossing,” knowing how much could go wrong.

Davidson, Reavis, and Halsell in the late 1970s and Conover in 1987 would not be the last to attempt by clandestine means to humanize cross-border migration, a subject that dings all sides of the social, political, and economic triangle. It is another sign of the nature of ephemera that these authors and their editors and agents might well have genuinely believed that each effort was utterly singular. All of these undertakings happened years before magazine and newspaper articles were widely accessible through Internet search engines. Even as late as 2010, finding the stories required some digging, especially stories published in smaller circulation newspapers and magazines of the predigital middle years of the twentieth century or those contained in books that have long been out of print and did not circulate widely when they were in print.

The issue of illegal immigration certainly has not gone away, nor has the need to tell the story again and again, each time with a more customized approach. Charlie LeDuff, for the New York Times in 2001, trailed along with a group of illegal immigrants from Mexico City to the meet-up with their coyote at the border and from there to the street corners of Farmingville, Long Island.17 The following year, the Los Angeles Times published Sonia Nazario’s “Enrique’s Journey,” a thirty-thousand word, six-chapter series that chronicled the eight attempts of a boy to get from Tegucigalpa, Honduras, to the United States. The series was based on exhaustive interviews with the main subjects and their families, but no undercover work, and won the 2003 Pulitzer Prize for Feature Writing.

Nazario updated her earlier work into a book published in 2006, centering the narrative on Enrique’s repeated treacherous
train-hopping experience. To better describe what he endured, she retraced his journey by train herself. A reviewer in her own newspaper cites as the book’s great strength the way the author “complicates our notion of Latin American migrant-ness,” but also notes as a deficit how short the book is on intimate details—“the color of a t-shirt or the timbre of a voice—which compromises the density of the work.”

Witnessed, such details present themselves almost effortlessly; secondhand, not so readily.

A year later, the firsthand approach was back. In collaboration with the New York Times, Sandra Ochoa, a reporter for El Tiempo, a newspaper in Cuenca, Ecuador, investigated the first piece of a coyote pipeline by taking the dangerous eight-day voyage of 1,100 nautical miles from an Ecuadorean beach resort to the northern coast of Guatemala.

All of the great undercover and dangerous near-undercover adventures of this period took place at a time of ethical angst, especially among top newspaper editors, over the state of American journalism. Polls showed a plummet in public trust of the media. A Time cover story in 1983 titled “Journalism Under Fire,” captured and chronicled the prevailing mood, and Tom Goldstein revisited all of this in his book two years later. Journalism’s ethics and excesses—in a more general way—were on the firing line, followed by newly vigilant efforts to self-police the field.

In all such considerations, the journalistic use of undercover tactics inevitably surfaced in the writers’ accounts, even if not in the survey results. The rise of hidden camera use and the growing popularity of the “gotcha!” exposés for television audiences were much in the collective professional consciousness, as was a surprise imbroglio that erupted during the Pulitzer Prize deliberations of
1979. This was over a major undercover Chicago Sun-Times investigation, during which the newspaper opened and operated a tavern called The Mirage.

**Should reporters play roles?** was the headline over a published debate in the bulletin of the American Society of Newspaper Editors between two Pulitzer Prize board members at the time, Clayton Kirkpatrick, president of the Chicago Tribune Company, who argued yes, and Eugene C. Patterson, president and editor of the St. Petersburg Times, who argued a somewhat qualified no. Patterson acknowledged that his newspaper had indeed sponsored its own investigations involving undercover techniques: a reporter posed as a night nurse to investigate nursing home abuse and another as a home buyer to expose illegal racial “steering.” But he echoed other editors in saying he would not do so in those instances again. He said both stories could have been reported straight with harder work and that he had changed his mind “about the wisdom, if not the rectitude” of stunt journalism in cases where aboveboard reporting would do. But he still reserved the right to use “fakery” as a last resort if it was the only way to serve the public interest. “This isn’t a goody-two-shoes business,” he said. “But posing as something we aren’t does put our pursuit of truth on a tainted tangent going in and I don’t think we ought to take it as a norm. A phony means to an honest end still leaves a faint disquiet in me.”

For journalism’s high priests, there was, in the intensity of that atmosphere, not a good enough answer to the question, “How can deeply committed truth-seekers deceive to get information?” And with that, the Pulitzer Prize prospects of undercover exposés went from dim to dark for a decade and a half.

In September 1979, the Los Angeles Times media writer, David
Shaw, assessed this ostensible movement away from acceptance of journalistic “masquerades.” He gathered a number of recent instances to mention, including a *Detroit News* reporter who posed as a congressman to show how lax security was at ceremonies on the White House lawn; an *LA Times* reporter who posed as a graduate student in psychology to expose conditions at a local mental institution; a *Wall Street Journal* reporter who worked an assembly line for three weeks to investigate charges the company was violating fair labor practices; and a *Boston Globe* reporter who posed as a guard at a youth detention center to report on maltreatment. The *Chicago Tribune*’s slew of worthy exposés were on his list, as well as the work of reporters for the *Detroit Free Press* who used undercover tactics to expose questionable marriage counselors, to expose a surgery mill, and to investigate racially discriminatory real estate practices. He also noted the more dubious effort of a *Rochester Democrat and Chronicle* reporter who took a job clerking at a secondhand bookstore to learn that book reviewers were reselling the books they got for free.

Another Detroit reporter pretended to have arthritis to catch a man selling phony medication. As Neil Shine, the paper’s managing editor, told Shaw at the time, “She didn’t go up to him and say, ‘Hi, I’m the medical writer from the *Free Press*. Are you a charlatan?'” Shaw also mentioned another common practice: for reporters on the police beat phoning from the press room at headquarters to call officers at other precincts, saying, “This is Flanagan at LAPD,” intentionally giving the false impression that the reporter was a cop without exactly saying so. Other papers, too, sponsored major undercover investigations in this period, including the *Seattle Times*, the *Nashville Tennessean*, the *Washington Post*, the *Boston Globe*, the *Chicago Sun-Times*, and the *Atlanta*
Constitution. The Los Angeles Times itself featured a number of other undercover investigations, many by Mike Goodman.29

The outright lying Reavis did as he reported undercover for Texas Monthly during that period did not concern him or the magazine’s editors in the least. The trade-off for him was simple. It grew out of his experiences as a civil rights worker in Alabama in summer 1965, impersonating a local white man on assignment from the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. His job at the SCLC was to put his southern drawl to work ferreting out such hard-to-get information as who had been jailed, what the bonds were, whether or not whites were being admitted to the literacy test while blacks were forced to wait in line. “When I became a journalist,” he emailed, “I didn’t see much difference between what I’d done in Alabama and what I was doing as a writer.” That meant on one occasion borrowing the identification of a man whose name happened to be Will Rogers. “Do you write?” a woman asked him. “No and I don’t do rope tricks, either,” he shot back, and thus avoided further prying. In one other instance, to assume a new identity for a story, he pulled the death certificate of a dead junkie and in another, to investigate security firms that hire guards with felony convictions in their background, he passed six lie detector tests with “a mixture of lies and truth.” He used his real name, age, and place of birth but claimed he only had been arrested once for drunken disorderliness. “That is not true,” he said. “I have a jail record some dozen arrests long—I was a civil rights and anti-war agitator during the sixties—but I’ve never been jailed for drunkenness. I lied about my employment record, address, personal references, and numerous other things. I posed as a West Texas welder who had recently moved to Houston to forget a divorce. The principle that guided me in filling out the
application was one a convict would use: tell the truth if you can, but lie as necessary to get the job.” He said the story resulted in a change in Texas, California, and Louisiana law, obliging security firms to run police checks on the guards they hired.

Reavis now teaches at North Carolina State University at Raleigh and harbors no remorse whatsoever for falsehoods he told in the line of work. He shares the common view that a journalist’s job is to find out the things people need to know so that they can have good government. “If you have to lie to do it, you do it,” he said by telephone. “The people need the information. So it never bothered me.” In 2010, Simon and Schuster published Catching Out: The Secret World of Day Laborers, his account of working by the day and hour not only to write a book about the needed social and economic reforms for day workers but for its own sake: to supplement his retirement savings. He hasn’t continued, though. At age sixty-four, he said, the necessary stamina loomed much larger for him than it had when he was in his thirties. Next to covering guerrilla movements in South America, he said his undercover stories, echoing so many others who have used this approach, provided the most satisfying work of his career. “Most of the writers at Texas Monthly had Ivy League educations and I didn’t,” he said. “I thought, ‘What can I do that they don’t or won’t do?’ And I enjoyed every minute of it.”

It is instructive that Henry got his first undercover assignment from the Washington Post in the winter 1980. The timing is significant. It came shortly after Shaw’s summarization a few months earlier of the more ethically conscious mood among top newspaper editors. This was in the aftermath of the controversy provoked by the Sun-Times Mirage sting during the Pulitzer judging in the spring of 1979. Henry was singled out both in the 1983 Time cover
story and in Goldstein’s 1985 book, likely only because the timing and placement of both his series made them convenient high-end contemporary examples. Likewise, Goldstein also mentioned as a Pulitzer finalist the *Wall Street Journal*’s 1983 undercover exposé of temporary slave labor camps in the Southwest. George Getschow had posed as a day laborer to get inside the camps.

Henry recalls that his editors at the *Post* were not overly concerned about this criticism of undercover reporting that happened to waft his way. This was especially noteworthy for another reason: Henry’s migrant assignment in 1983 was approved despite a more general sensitivity to ethical standards at the *Post* in the aftermath of returning a 1981 Pulitzer Prize when the story turned out to have been fabricated. At the *Post*, undercover assignments like Henry’s had long been “something of a maverick tradition,” Henry explained in *American Carnival*, mentioning Ben Bagdikian’s self-engineered prison sentence on an ostensible murder conviction in 1972. Also, the approval of both of Henry’s undercover undertakings came well after the *Sun-Times* brouhaha, even though the newspaper’s executive editor, Benjamin C. Bradlee, was one of that project’s most outspoken critics. Shaw quoted Bradlee as saying, “In a day in which we are spending thousands of man hours uncovering deception, we simply cannot deceive. How can newspapers fight for honesty and integrity when they themselves are less than honest in getting a story? When cops pose as newspapermen, we get goddam sore. Quite properly so. So how can we pose as something we’re not?”

To Goldstein, Bradlee explained why he could split hairs between what the *Chicago Sun-Times* reporters had done during Mirage and what *Post* reporters were permitted to do, such as Henry for migrants and the homeless and Athelia Knight for her bus-to-Lorton reformatory series. “I see a really seminal distinc-
tion,” he said, “between planning any kind of a deception, however much the end might seem to justify the means, and embarking on a project where your occupation as a journalist is not advertised,” because in the second instance there is no pose, “no sign around the reporter’s neck.” Also, at no point, he said, did Henry or Knight lie.35