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Between Journalism and Fiction

Hunter S. Thompson and the birth of Gonzo

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According to Tom Wolfe, Hunter S. Thompson was "the only twentieth-century equivalent of Mark Twain."[1] Wolfe's comparison was meant to feature Thompson as a humorist, but biographical similarities also linked the two writers. Both Twain and Thompson arrived in San Francisco as obscure journalists, thrived on the city's anarchic energies, and departed as national figures. Exactly one hundred years after Twain left San Francisco, Thompson moved to Colorado and created his most extravagant character: himself. The signature works that followed—along with his drug and alcohol consumption, gun fetish, and "fortified compound"—are strongly associated with Woody Creek, where he lived until his suicide in 2005. But if Thompson's celebrity was a Colorado phenomenon, his literary formation played out in San Francisco during what he called "a Main Era—the kind of peak that never comes again."[2] That peak helped Thompson invent not only a literary genre, but also himself.

Thompson's self-fashioning unfolded in stages. In 1960, he set off on a Beat-style cross-country drive that ended in Seattle. From there, he hitchhiked to San Francisco, where he visited City Lights Bookstore and other Beat shrines. After failing to find work, Thompson decamped for Big Sur, the Beat hangout and home of novelist Henry Miller, a major influence. (Although he staked out Miller's mailbox, he never met his idol.) After two years of travel, Thompson moved to the Sonoma County town of Glen Ellen, home of Jack London, before settling with his wife and infant son at 318 Parnassus Avenue, not far from Haight-Ashbury. Scratching out a living as a freelance journalist, he covered the 1964 GOP convention at the Cow Palace and wrote an unpublished review of Tom Wolfe's *The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby* (1965). Editorial quarrels over the coverage of the convention and the Wolfe review led to his split from *The National Observer,* his primary outlet at the time.

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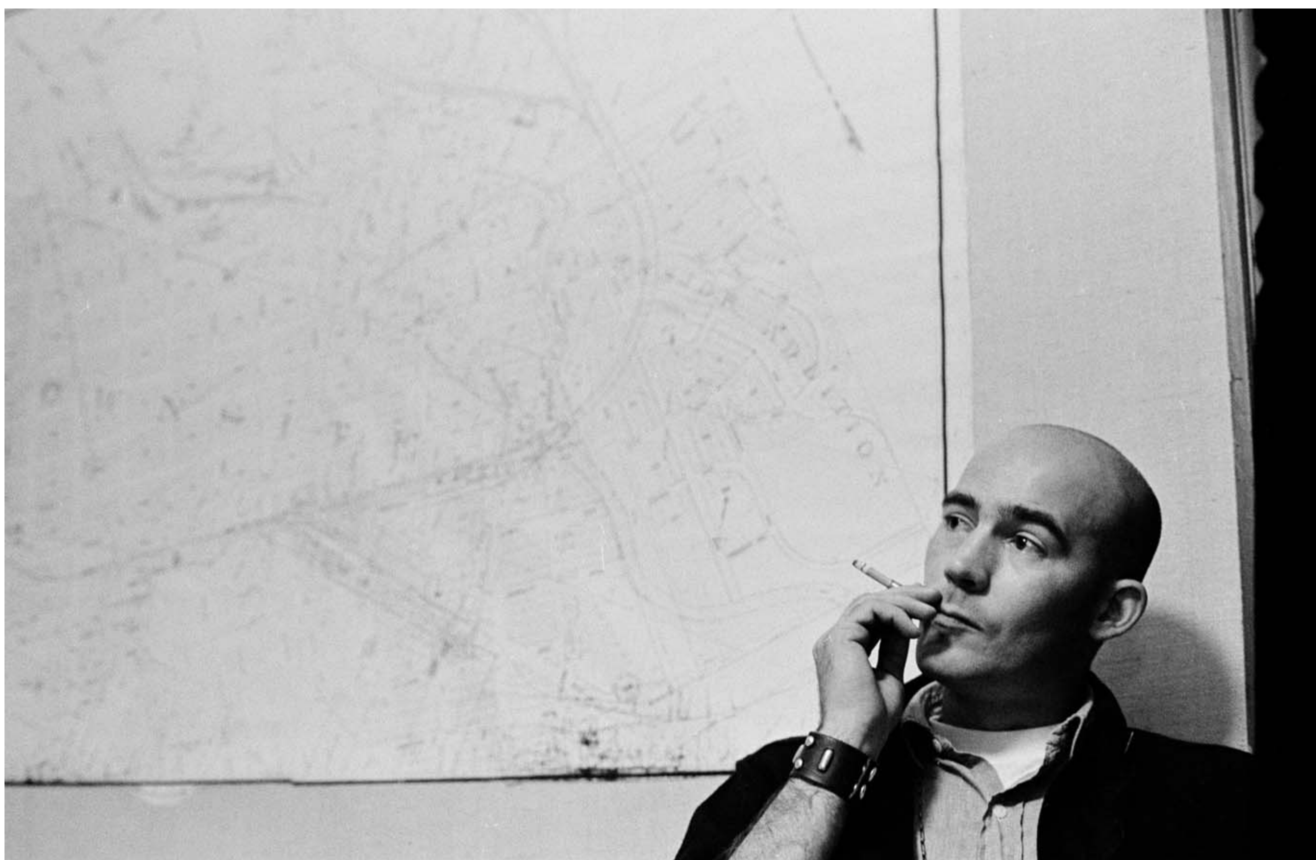

Photograph of Hunter S. Thompson by David Hiser.

In January 1965, a destitute Thompson pitched story ideas to Carey McWilliams, then editor of *The Nation*. Before moving to New York City from Los Angeles in the 1950s, McWilliams had produced a stream of first-rate books and articles that established him as California's shrewdest observer. His history of California farm labor, *Factories in the Field* (1939), impressed Thompson, who was compiling his own photographs for a book project called *The Californians*.[3] Thompson's query letter to *The Nation*, which referred to McWilliams as "an old California hand," played to that expertise. Thompson's first story idea was about "the final collapse of the myth of San Francisco." In his view, the city's personality had gone from "neurotic to paranoid to what now looks like the first stages of a catatonic fit." His fallback ideas were stories about Governor Pat Brown's budget proposals and a job his wife had taken as a telephone solicitor for a dance studio. What would happen, Thompson wondered, if a black customer accepted the telephone offer? He imagined the dilemma of a hypothetical and hard-pressed solicitor: "Will Sally make the sale and chance the ultimate disaster—a coon showing up at the studio—or will she somehow ascertain the pigment, then do her duty and queer her only sale?"[4]

McWilliams would not have welcomed the racial epithets in the query letter. Indeed, his earlier work on racial discrimination earned him an interview with the state legislature's Committee on Un-American Activities in California in 1943. Committee chair Jack Tenney quizzed McWilliams about his views on interracial marriage, which was still illegal in California. McWilliams, who was serving in state government at the time, said he thought the law should be abolished. Tenney later reported that McWilliams's views were "identical with [*sic*] *Communist Party* ideology."[5]

In his reply to Thompson, McWilliams suggested a piece about the Hells Angels motorcycle gang, which Thompson eagerly accepted. McWilliams's editorial intervention turned out to be life-changing. Shortly after that article appeared, Thompson had a book contract with Random

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House and spent the next eighteen months researching and writing his first-person account of life with the motorcycle gang. Dedicated to McWilliams, *Hell's Angels: A Strange and Terrible Saga* was Thompson's first bestseller, a parade example of New Journalism and a shrewd critique of the mainstream media. For the rest of his career, McWilliams was the one editor whom he consistently and unhesitatingly admired. Throughout the 1960s, he wrote McWilliams almost weekly on a variety of topics. "More than any other person, Carey was responsible for the success of *Hell's Angels*," Thompson later acknowledged. "He encouraged me around every bend."[6]

As *Hell's Angels* made its way into the world, Thompson met Warren Hinckle, editor of *Ramparts* magazine. Founded in 1962 as a Catholic literary quarterly in Menlo Park, *Ramparts* had become an award-winning San Francisco muckraker that ran bombshell stories on Vietnam, the CIA, and the Black Panthers. Thompson, who was listed as a contributing editor but never wrote for the magazine, admired Hinckle's swashbuckling style.

> I met [Hinckle] through his magazine, *Ramparts*. I met him before *Rolling Stone* ever existed. *Ramparts* was a crossroads of my world in San Francisco, a slicker version of *The Nation*—with glossy covers and such. Warren had a genius for getting stories that could be placed on the front page of the *New York Times*. He had a beautiful eye for what story had a high, weird look to it. You know, busting the Defense Department—*Ramparts* was real left, radical. I paid a lot of attention to them and ended up being a columnist.[7]

A Thompson visit to the *Ramparts* office, where Hinckle kept a capuchin monkey named Henry Luce, quickly became legend. The two men left for drinks and returned to find Thompson's backpack open, pills of various colors strewn across the floor, and a deranged Henry Luce racing around the office. He was rushed to the veterinarian's office to have his stomach pumped. An unsympathetic Thompson later wrote to Hinckle, "That fucking monkey should be killed—or at least arrested—on general principles."[8]

Thompson's 1966 move to Colorado re-created the bucolic bohemianism of Big Sur, but he attended the 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago with Hinckle and his colleagues. He told his editor at Random House that his *Ramparts* contacts assured him that "all manner of hell is going to break loose" in Chicago.[9] It was another turning point for Thompson, who was appalled by the police violence he witnessed there. Scampering from agitated officers on Michigan Avenue, Thompson found two cops posted outside his hotel blocking his retreat. As he recalled in a letter, "I finally just ran between the truncheons, screaming, 'I live here, goddamnit! I'm paying fifty dollars a day!'" The experience rattled even a seasoned reporter who thrived on action. "I went from a state of Cold Shock on Monday, to Fear on Tuesday, then Rage, and finally Hysteria—which lasted for nearly a month," he later wrote.[10] Having built his reputation covering the Hells Angels, San Francisco hippies, and student radicals in Berkeley, he began to target what he saw as the corruption and violence of mainstream American politics. "I went to the Democratic convention as a journalist and returned a raving beast," he later told a fellow journalist.[11]

To cover the convention and the mayhem outside its walls, Hinckle produced the *Ramparts Wall Poster*, which reported on the convention and related street activities. The posters were single full-folio sheets whose title and format recalled the publications of Mao Zedong's Red Guard during the Cultural Revolution. (The motto for the *Ramparts Wall Poster* was "Up Against the Wall.") Two years later, Thompson lifted the idea during his campaign for sheriff in Pitkin County, Colorado. He promised to send Hinckle a copy of his *Aspen Wallposter*. "And if the *Wallposter* name rings a bell," he wrote Hinckle, "well, I'll never deny it."[12]

When *Ramparts* filed for bankruptcy in January 1969, Hinckle left to start a new magazine called *Scanlan's*. In its first issue, he ran a Thompson piece, rejected by *Playboy*, on skier Jean-Claude Killy. Thompson focused on the difficulty of writing the story, which would become a major theme in his work. While preparing the piece, he was accompanied by *Boston Globe* writer Bill Cardoso. Thompson wrote Cardoso into the story, and the presence of a companion would become another signature theme. Later, Cardoso coined the term "Gonzo" to describe Thompson's work.

Thompson was grateful that Hinckle published the Killy article, but he was unhappy with the magazine's design. "Graphically, it was a fucking horror show," he wrote to Hinckle. "It looks like it was put together by a compositor's apprentice with a head full of Seconal." He especially disliked the illustrations that accompanied the Killy article. "On lesser fronts, I want to impose a condition on anything I may or may not sell you in the future—to wit: That any

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'cartoon/illustration' by Jim Nutt will not be allowed within 15 pages on either side of my byline."[13] When Thompson offered to cover the 1970 Kentucky Derby for *Scanlan's*, Hinckle paired him with Welsh illustrator Ralph Steadman, whose drawings became the visual counterpart to Thompson's extravagant prose. After the Derby, Steadman recalled that Thompson was concerned. "This whole thing will probably finish me as a writer," he said. "I have no story."[14] Later, he confided to Steadman that the article was "useless, aside from the flashes of style & tone it captures." The illustrations, on the other hand, were fine, and he proposed another collaboration. "I'd like nothing better than to work with you on another one of those savage binges again, & to that end I'll tell my agent to bill us as a package—for good or ill."[15]

Widely considered the first example of Gonzo journalism, "The Kentucky Derby Is Decadent and Depraved" wasn't the career-killer that Thompson initially feared. Writing to Hinckle in July 1970, Thompson proposed "a series of Ky. Derby-style articles (with Steadman) on things like the Super Bowl, Times Sq. on New Year's eve, Mardi Gras, the Masters (golf) Tournament, the America's Cup, Christmas Day with the Chicago Police, Grand National Rodeo in Denver . . . rape them all, quite systematically and then we could sell it as a book: 'Amerikan Dreams. . . .'" The idea, in brief, was to "travel around the country and shit on *everything*."[16] Thompson thought the "Rape Series on Amerikan Institutions," which Hinckle wanted to call the Thompson-Steadman Report, was a "king-bitch dog-fucker of an idea." He and Steadman "could go almost anywhere & turn out a series of articles so weird & frightful as to stagger every mind in journalism."[17]

Although the circulation for *Scanlan's* reached 150,000 within six months, it tanked after eight issues, and Thompson again needed a suitable outlet. Now settled in Colorado, he began writing for *Rolling Stone,* an upstart San Francisco magazine that focused on the counterculture and its music. Its cofounders, Jann Wenner and *San Francisco Chronicle* music columnist Ralph J. Gleason, were both *Ramparts* alumni, but Hinckle laid off Wenner and infuriated Gleason by writing "A Social History of the Hippies" a few months before the Summer of Love. Nevertheless, Wenner lifted design elements from *Ramparts* and used the *Ramparts* office to mock up the first issue, which appeared November 1967.

Thompson began contributing to *Rolling Stone* the following October, but his next major work was a long piece on a motorcycle race and National District Attorney's Association meeting that he and Los Angeles attorney Oscar Acosta attended in Las Vegas. *Sports Illustrated* rejected the article, whose word count far exceeded the editor's request, and Wenner agreed to run it as a two-part feature in *Rolling Stone* with Steadman's illustrations. Thompson used the byline Raoul Duke, the "well-worn pseudonym" he had used to acquire weapons while running for Pitkin County sheriff.[18] The book version went to Random House, which published *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* in 1972. Tom Wolfe's blurb described the book as "a scorching, epochal sensation," and it became Thompson's Gonzo masterpiece. By that time, Thompson had been named chief of *Rolling Stone*'s National Affairs Desk. His reporting on the 1972 presidential election appeared in the magazine and was collected for *Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail '72*. Straight Arrow Books, another Wenner creation, published the book version in 1973.

Although Gonzo journalism is synonymous with Thompson's output, the term masks his greatest achievement. From the beginning, Thompson considered himself a novelist and modeled himself on Hemingway, Fitzgerald, and Faulkner. Whenever necessary, he shrugged off journalism's protocols to supercharge his prose. "Fiction is a bridge to truth that journalism can't reach," he told an editor at Knopf. "Facts are lies when they're added up."[19] That perspective wasn't lost on his contemporaries. Political strategist Frank Mankiewicz observed that Thompson's description of the 1972 presidential race was "the most accurate and least factual account of the campaign."[20] Likewise, novelist William Kennedy noted that his longtime friend seemed to be writing journalism while actually developing his fictional *oeuvre*. When his Random House editor asked whether *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* was journalism or fiction, Thompson offered a lengthy reply questioning the distinction. In his view, Jack Kerouac's *On the Road,* which he described as "a long rambling piece of personal journalism," was "the first big breakthrough on this front."[21] Wenner was less interested in such generic distinctions, and though Thompson complained privately about writing for a magazine preoccupied with what the Jackson 5 had for breakfast, *Rolling Stone* made him a celebrity. His notoriety even gave rise to a cartoon character, Uncle Duke

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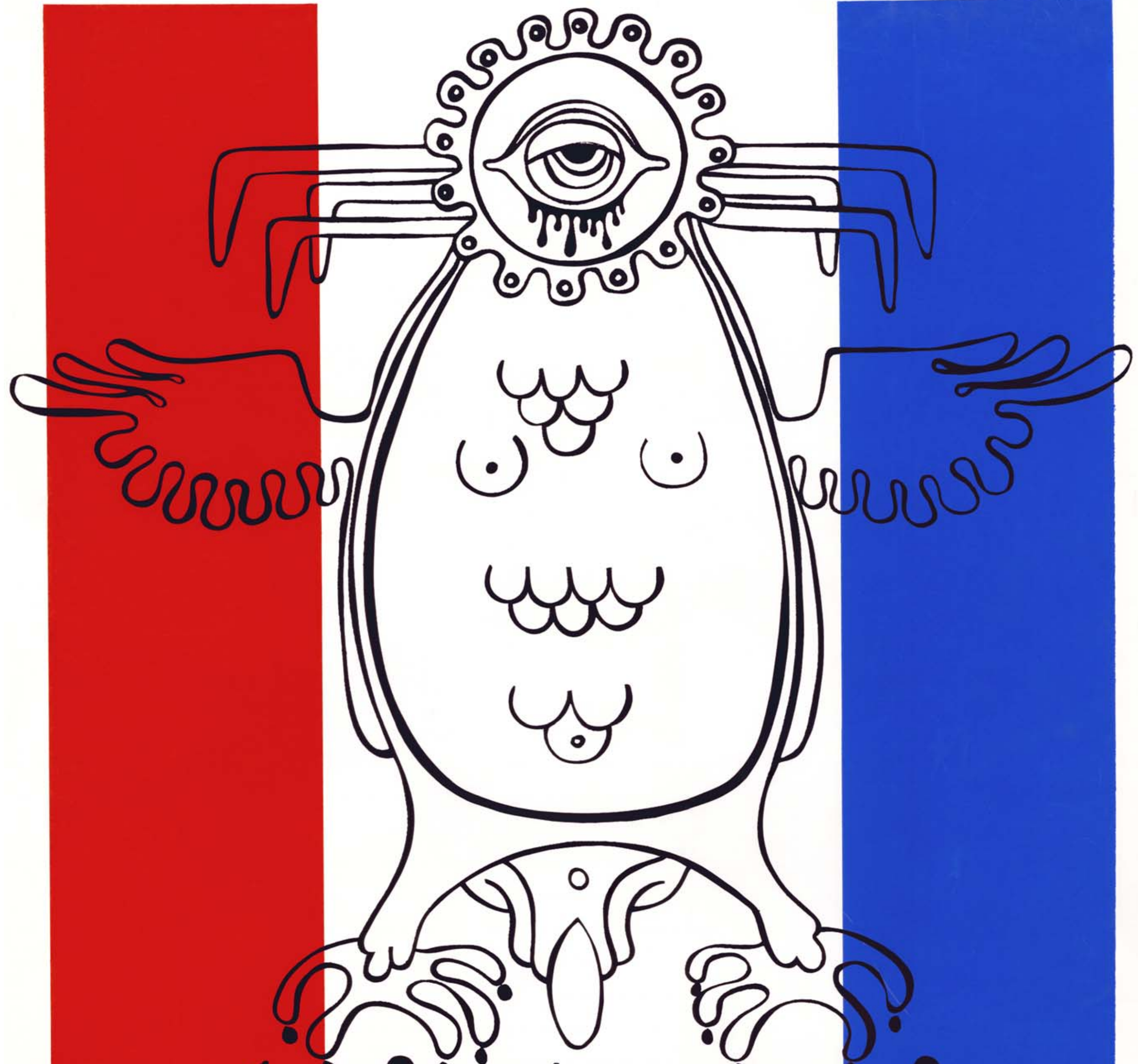

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in Garry Trudeau's *Doonesbury,* which won a Pulitzer Prize in 1975. Although Thompson resented Trudeau's invention, it amplified his fame.

Fifty years after the publication of Thompson's key works, and more than a decade after his death, Thompson is still regarded primarily as a celebrity. Yet there is a great deal of evidence to support his own claim, made to a Vietnamese colonel in 1975, that he was "one of the best writers currently using the English language as both a musical instrument and a political weapon."[22] Four separate developments combined to push Thompson beyond traditional journalism. The first was his experience in Chicago while covering the 1968 Democratic National Convention, which transformed his understanding of American politics and stoked his outrage. The second was his pairing with Ralph Steadman, whose illustrations were an indispensable part of Gonzo's success. Third was Thompson's idea to produce a string of stories in the mold of the Kentucky Derby piece. Although the Thompson-Steadman Report never came off at *Scanlan's*, Thompson produced *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* in its image. The final factor was Thompson's decision to write that landmark book in the voice of Raoul Duke. It was an attempt, he later told Tom Wolfe, to prevent the "grey little cocksuckers who run things" from "drawing that line between Journalism and Fiction."[23]

Well before Thompson visited Chicago, however, his literary formation was almost complete. "San Francisco in the middle sixties was a very special time and place to be a part of," he wrote in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. "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."[24] Thompson's transformation required well-placed supporters and allies, and he was exceptionally fortunate to have worked with three California editors who shared his dissatisfaction with mainstream American journalism. McWilliams's guidance, Hinckle's audacity, and Wenner's feeling for the countercultural zeitgeist were essential parts of Thompson's self-creation. Unlike Twain, Thompson didn't invent a new name for himself during his San Francisco sojourn; but much like his precursor, he left the city with everything he needed to become one of his generation's most distinctive voices.

Thompson has at least one notable successor today. Matt Taibbi is profane, outlandish, scornful, and funny, and the Gonzo influence, especially in his early work, is unmistakable. His first solo book, *Spanking the Donkey: On the Campaign Trail with the Democrats* (2005), was an updated version of Thompson's *Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail '72*. Taibbi even itemized the contents of his car trunk, as Thompson did at the beginning of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. It was therefore fitting that Taibbi became a contributing editor at *Rolling Stone* following the book's publication. After winning a National Magazine Award in 2008, he took on Goldman Sachs, the investment bank that he described as "a great vampire squid wrapped around the face of humanity, relentlessly jamming its blood funnel into anything that smells like money."[25] But Taibbi did more than impugn the Wall Street giant; he also explained its complicated hustles to general readers. That combination of bombast and clear explication made his claims increasingly difficult to ignore or refute. Wenner now regards Taibbi as "absolutely the first person to come along since Hunter who could be called Hunter's peer."[26]

After *Rolling Stone* moved to New York City in 1977, *Mother Jones* became the standard-bearer for San Francisco independent journalism. Its founders—Adam Hochschild, Richard Parker, and Paul Jacobs—were *Ramparts* veterans, and their premier issue in 1976 won a National Magazine Award. If *Rolling Stone* inherited *Ramparts*' id, *Mother Jones* has continued its knack for producing big whistleblower stories. In 2012, David Corn reported on GOP presidential nominee Mitt Romney's closed-door remarks about 47 percent of American voters being overly dependent on the government. That piece drew an awkward apology from Romney and earned *Mother Jones* the prestigious George Polk Award. Earlier this year, *Mother Jones* published Shane Bauer's 35,000-word story about working for a private prison in Louisiana. Its website received two million hits in the first twelve hours, larger outlets picked up the story, and the Department of Justice later announced that it would no longer contract with private prisons.

It is unclear whether or how San Francisco might launch the next literary celebrity. The city today is increasingly dominated by high-tech corporations whose products have shattered the business models for American journalism and publishing. Despite these challenges, San Francisco outlets continue to occupy a distinct niche in today's media ecology. From the Gold Rush on, the city's writers have challenged the political and literary status quo with style. Despite his

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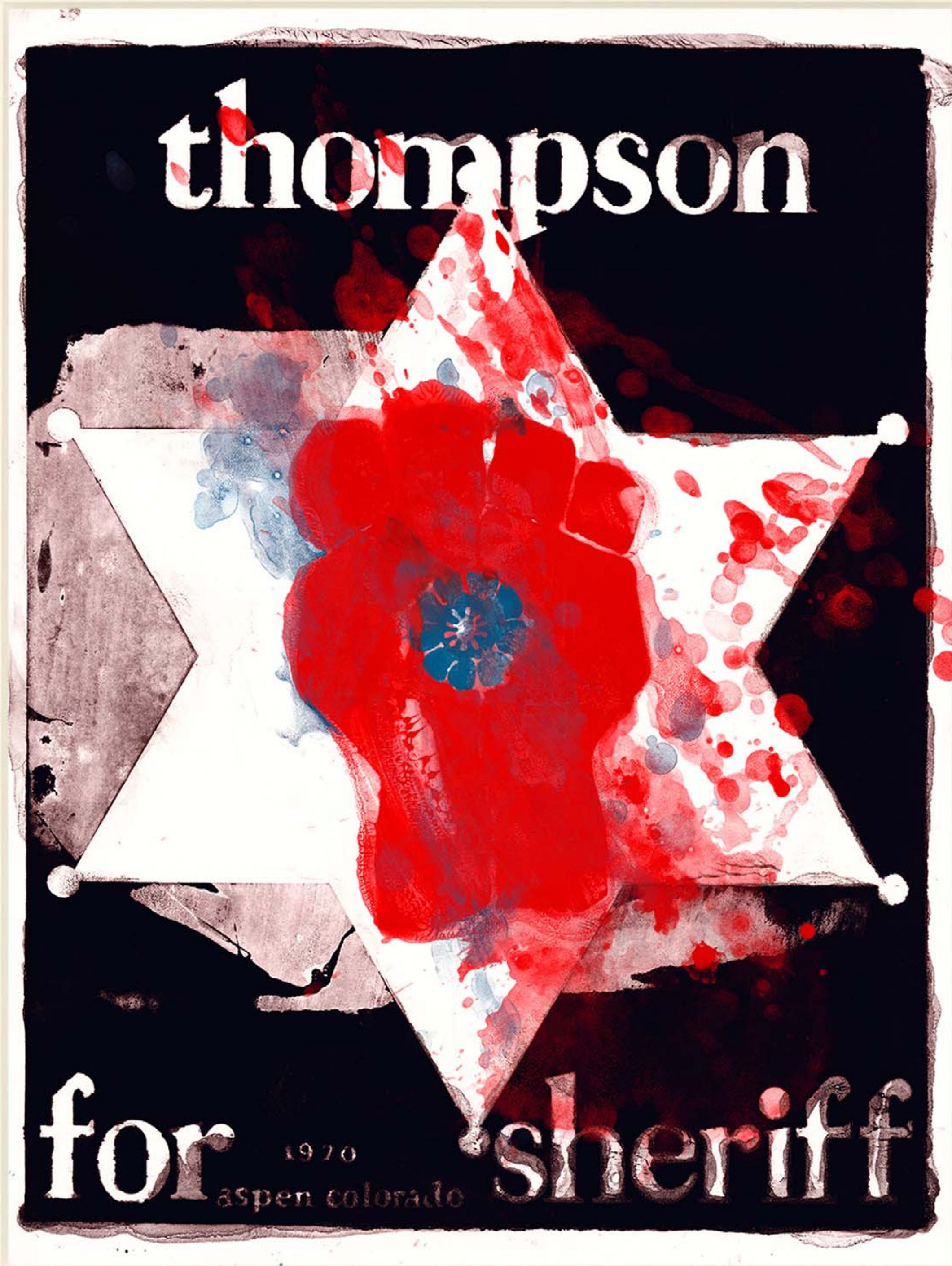

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short sojourn in San Francisco, Hunter Thompson occupies a special place in that alternative tradition. **B**

Notes

[1] Jann S. Wenner and Corey Seymour, *Gonzo: The Life of Hunter S. Thompson* (New York: Back Bay Books, 2008), 436.

[2] Hunter S. Thompson, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (New York: Random House, 1972; 2d ed. Vintage Books, 1998), 66.

[3] William McKeen, *Outlaw Journalist: The Life and Times of Hunter S. Thompson* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2008), 94.

[4] Hunter S. Thompson, *The Proud Highway: The Saga of a Desperate Southern Gentleman* (New York: Villard Books, 1997), 481.

[5] Peter Richardson, *American Prophet: The Life and Work of Carey McWilliams* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 128.

[6] Thompson, *The Proud Highway*, xxvii.

[7] Douglas Brinkley and Terry McDonell, "The Art of Journalism: An Interview with Hunter S. Thompson," *The Paris Review* 156 (Fall 2000), http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/619/the-art-of-journalism-no-1-hunter-s-thompson.

[8] Thompson, *The Proud Highway*, 639.

[9] Hunter S. Thompson, *Fear and Loathing in America: The Brutal Odyssey of an Outlaw Journalist* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), 15.

[10] Hunter S. Thompson, *Kingdom of Fear: Loathsome Secrets of a Star-Crossed Child in the Final Days of the American Century* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003), 78–81.

[11] William McKeen, *Outlaw Journalist: The Life and Times of Hunter S. Thompson* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2008), 125.

[12] Thompson, *Fear and Loathing in America*, 283.

[13] Thompson, *Fear and Loathing in America*, 283.

[14] Steadman, *The Joke's Over* (Orlando: Harcourt Inc., 2006), 31.

[15] Thompson, *Fear and Loathing in America*, 309–10.

[16] Thompson, *Fear and Loathing in America*, 319.

[17] Thompson, *Fear and Loathing in America*, 320.

[18] Thompson, *Fear and Loathing in America*, 325.

[19] Thompson, *The Proud Highway*, 529.

[20] McKeen, *Outlaw Journalist*, 194.

[21] Thompson, *Fear and Loathing in America*, 421.

[22] Thompson, *Fear and Loathing in America*, 613.

[23] Thompson, *Fear and Loathing in America*, 376.

[24] Thompson, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, 66–67.

[25] Matt Taibbi, "The Great American Bubble Machine," *Rolling Stone*, 13 July 2009.

[26] Verini, James, "Lost Exile: The Unlikely Life and Sudden Death of The Exile, Russia's Angriest Newspaper," *Vanity Fair*, 24 February 2010. http://www.vanityfair.com/culture/2010/02/exile-201002.

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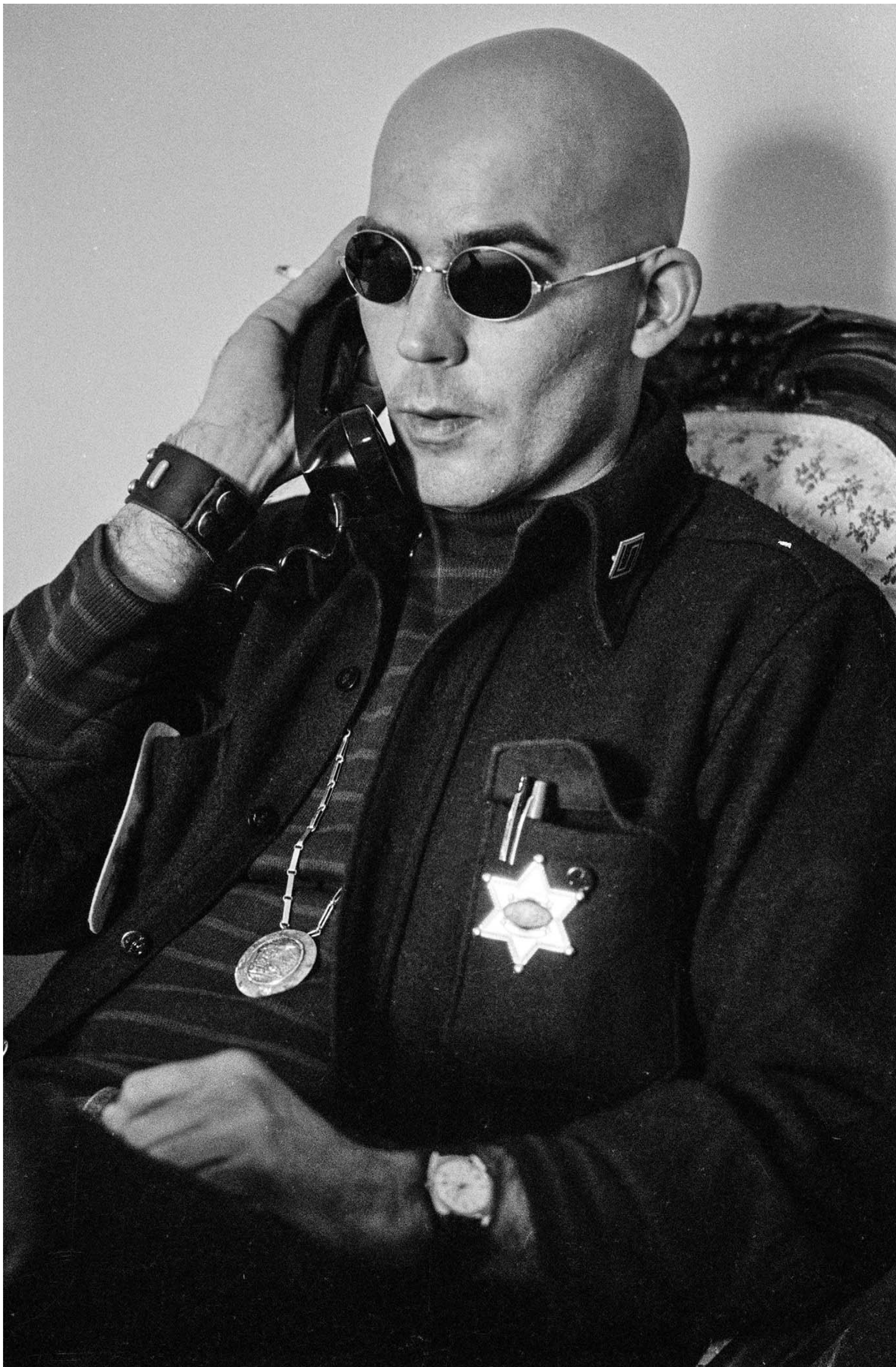

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