Language, Please

Word Choice

WITH

Chloé Cooper Jones
Story synopsis

On the afternoon of July 17, 2014, Ramsey Orta was standing outside a Staten Island beauty supply shop with his friend Eric Garner when police approached. Orta took out his phone to record, and he kept filming as one of the officers choked Garner to death. Orta shared the video, and it got massive national attention. He hoped it would bring justice for his friend, but that's not at all what happened. Reporter Chloé Cooper Jones found that the New York Police Department retaliated against Orta with targeted harassment for daring to expose police brutality.

Why this story?

Reflecting on her investigation, Chloé Cooper Jones spoke to us about aiming for a feeling of “narrative closeness” when characterizing events in Ramsey Orta’s life. Her reporting illuminates a slew of social issues — police violence, mass incarceration, drug use, poverty, racism — that shaped his life-altering decision and its aftermath. To achieve that feeling of narrative closeness, Jones pored over official documents, relied on her own direct observations, and — perhaps most of all — drew on hours and hours of time with Orta himself. We chose this story for Language, Please to understand what it takes to achieve narrative closeness in journalistic investigations, through reporting methods and carefully chosen words on the page.

Word Choice: Chloé Cooper Jones
Language, Please: We know from the story that you spent quite a while reporting this piece. How long did the process take from pitching to publication?

Chloé Cooper Jones: I spent a full year visiting Ramsey in various correctional facilities upstate. The first time I went to see him, it was important to me that I didn’t go with a specific plan or preconceived notion of what I wanted to get from him or from the story, that all I did was go and listen. So I was able to pitch this to my editor, Kevin Nguyen, and I just said, “I need a lot of time to just go see him, to be with him and to listen and to process a lot of information and do a lot of research.” And luckily, Kevin said, “Well, I think this story will be relevant any time we run it, so you can have this time.”

I understand that not all journalists can ask for a year to write a piece. However, I think if this piece resonates with people, I would say maybe it’ll be inspiration for a journalist working on a story to ask for an extra week, or even just an extra day, or an extra single conversation that doesn’t feel like it has a ton of pressure on it and doesn’t feel like it has some specific aim that you’re always driving at. How do we see this person outside of how we’re framing them for an article or for an essay, see them as broadly and as humanistically as possible? I think this story taught me, more than any other, how to really be a student to the story without bringing in my own needs or preconceived notions of what it should be.
There’s a lot to unpack even in the first sentence of this passage. When reporting on police violence, there can be a tendency to slip into what’s called the “exonerative tense” — passive, vague language that deflects accountability away from those responsible. Can you walk us through your editorial choices here?

The choice to use words like “choked” and “killed” is just backed up by facts. They don’t need to be downplayed and they don’t need to be spoken around, because there are specific things that I could look at that helped me feel rock solid in using those words. One was that there are manuals that specify the ways you can legally hold somebody in a police-sanctioned chokehold. There are very specific maneuvers and regulations and descriptions of all those things. Then you also had the coroner’s report that verified exactly why Garner died. It wasn’t because he was in ill health, as people liked to say. It wasn’t because he was overweight. It was because his throat was crushed. It’s not that I’m not sensitive to what may or may not be triggering to people. But I am going to use accurate language that is backed by facts, that is backed by research from multiple sources, to say directly what happened.

From *Fearing for His Life*
L,P: Something else that you do in this paragraph is help readers understand the relationship between individual actions and collective community responses...

CCJ: It was of grave importance to me that this be a story about one man and not what he represents. I think that sometimes, speaking for myself, there’s a tendency to see an opening for an idea and attach a person to that idea, and that can be dehumanizing to the subject at the center of the story. It was something I needed to make sure I safeguarded at all times, in the way that I was listening, the way I was asking questions, the way I was approaching my pitch, the way I was writing every sentence. But at the same time, it is just as crucial to explain how this particular choice that Ramsey makes — to make this recording and to disseminate the recording — is of great consequence not only in his life but in the lives of many others. They affect a community at large and really a culture at large. So it was important to me throughout the piece to be really aware of this tension and to have moments in which we could take a step back and see that, yes, there is this very singular, particular man at the center of the story who I am keeping my eye very close on. But his actions also influenced an entire movement.
L,P: One of the relationships that you explore in the piece is with Ramsey’s girlfriend, Deja, who visited him in prison. (Editor’s note: After sharing the video, Orta was incarcerated on a questionable gun possession charge.)

“The stress of the trip can cause symptoms related to Deja’s multiple sclerosis to flare, leaving her bedridden and in pain for days. But the hardest part of her commitment to Orta is her fear of the phone ringing and someone on the other end telling her he is dead. Orta has reported constant abuse and harassment from correctional officers since he’s been locked up. He claims he’s been threatened, beaten, poisoned. He and Deja both live in the constant fear that he’ll never return home.”

From *Fearing for His Life*

L,P: In this paragraph, you do a lot of very careful attribution. Can you talk about how you approach reporting on a person’s perspective while acknowledging that it might differ from an “official” account?

CCJ: This story has three major sources: Ramsey himself, documentation, and me. So there are several parts of the story where I enter and I say, this is what I saw and I’m reporting it directly. And then there are things that I can verify through documentation and through the FOIA claims that I had to file. And then there are parts that need to be really from Ramsey’s perspective. And there are some legal considerations that we have to go through to think about how strongly we can state certain things. But also, I think that part of what is important to the story is the ways in which gaslighting and trauma blur some lines for him and make his understanding of the truth and what’s happened to him kind of difficult to grasp. And so throughout the piece, there are moments in which I’m looking at those blurred spaces as he reports them. And it becomes important to frame that deeply from his perspective and not say what we’re listing here are pure facts. The salient point is not always, what can we verify specifically? Sometimes the salient point is, what is the experience of this person and how are they speaking to it?
This is the way Orta tells the story, in the impressionistic language of trauma. He tells me he dreams that he’s been released from prison and is walking in the daylight when suddenly bodies burst toward him from the shadows, engulfing him. He’s drowning in them, suffocating, trying to claw his way out. It’s hard to know how much the reality he remembers is melded with the nightmares.

From *Fearing for His Life*

**L,P:** This passage acknowledges that trauma can warp someone’s memory. We would love to hear about how you get across that unreality without discrediting the source.

**CCJ:** I did a year’s worth of deep listening to a man who was constantly passing through a lot of pain and a lot of confusion and a lot of trauma, and was constantly being put into solitary, feeling the edges of reality slip, and not knowing whether he was always awake or dreaming, not knowing whether reality was something he could trust. There are plenty of facts in this piece that are extremely carefully vetted and well researched. Part of the point of this piece is to say what this type of harassment, intimidation, and wrongful imprisonment does to somebody’s mind, and how especially profoundly inhumane practices like solitary housing units distort a person’s ability to feel grounded in reality at all. It was about saying it’s really hard for any of us to get to the truth if we’re undergoing constant psychological gaslighting and trauma and dislocation. So, always coming back to: What is this man’s story?

**Word Choice: Chloé Cooper Jones**
**L,P:** Can you tell us a bit about how you decide when to quote Ramsey or another source directly and when to paraphrase?

**CCJ:** Something that I’m really trying to accomplish is a feeling of narrative closeness. There’s one moment that speaks to this maybe the most, where Ramsey is being asked to eat meatloaf while incarcerated upstate. And he’s looking around, and he’s feeling pretty suspicious about the food that he’s eating. And he looks at the person next to him and the person opens their mouth and, instead of speaking, starts to vomit blood. Well, a lot of that description comes directly from Ramsey, but it also comes from depositions. So there are depositions that explain these things. But I think it could have been narratively cold to just say something like, *In a deposition, it was described as people throwing up.* That’s horrifying in and of itself. But I really want to move the reader as close to Ramsey’s experience as possible. And so I make a choice to move us into his vision, his eyes, his feeling.

**L,P:** Let’s take a step back from specific lines and ask you some big-picture questions. Were there any tricky editorial judgments in the writing or editing process that especially stood out to you? Were there any specific supports or resources that you relied on?

**CCJ:** My editor, Kevin Nguyen, he and I were pretty profoundly aligned in the aims of the piece and the importance of the piece. He had a lot of ideas about how the piece should end. And he was so smart about helping me cull the massive amount of material. There’s an endless list of ways that I feel gratitude to him, but one of the most singular ones is he was really willing to get into the material with me and look at everything that I had researched and amassed and all my questions. He spent a ton of time on the phone with me. He looked at many, many, many drafts of this. And he was in the mud of it, from base conception to all the rough drafts to all the handwritten notes and ideas and questions. That was a profound privilege.
**L,P:** Something we talked about a lot when putting together Language, Please is how to do thoughtful, nuanced reporting about communities that are not your own. You did some really interesting things in your piece where you enter the story as a character almost, where people know you’re a journalist and they don’t like that. Deja says to you, “Look in the mirror. Everyone knows why you’re here.” How do you balance recognizing that you have a certain degree of privilege to be able to be there and be reporting on this topic without inserting yourself too much into the story?

**CCJ:** The way I did that was just by being really honest about it. There are points where Ramsey’s explaining something to me, and I don’t understand what he’s talking about, and I have to get him to clarify it. And he’s like, “Oh, we’re from different places. We’re really different people.” And that was true. And it would have been really dishonest to dodge that at all. I try to keep my entry into the piece as minimal as possible and as highly intentional as possible, but showing that privilege divide felt like the only way to capture a certain real honesty in the piece.

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**L,P:** Is there anything else that we haven’t covered that you feel compelled to share?

**CCJ:** As much work and intentionality went into this piece, I read it again this morning and there are about a hundred things I would change. This process of trying to figure out how to be inclusive, how to be careful, how to be intentional – I think every journalist, myself included, needs to think about that as a constant learning process, one that needs to be deeply engaged every single time you sit down to do a piece of work. There’s no set of resources and there are no tools that allow for this to ever become a static thing. It’s always a dynamic thing. So I think journalists should feel so much excitement about being pushed in this way but also – I have to just say this for myself – be able to forgive what they don’t know, and not use that as a hindrance, but rather as a motivating factor.