The representation of machismo in literary journalism: How Luis Alberto Urrea, Ruben Martinez, and Mexicans narrate stories of machismo

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Abstract

This article uses critical discourse on the genre of literary journalism to conceptualize machismo as a primary means of representing the male gender in Mexico. The way gender and machismo are socially constructed and the stories Mexican men tell themselves about machismo influences their performance of it. This article addresses issues of gender representation and discusses what literary techniques authors of literary journalism employ to investigate the construction of Mexican masculinity. Modern day conceptions of machismo are still associated with traditional connotations of hyper-masculinity; it is a socially prescribed role internalized as the public ideal acting to inform women of societal expectations of men. Engrained deep in the culture, machismo is to a degree exacerbated by alcohol, leading to violence and spousal abuse. One major question is whether literary journalism can lead to a greater truth if authors use stylistic techniques that limit the reader's understanding of how conclusions were formed. However, this question is inconsequential if it can lead people to find their own truths and start social change. Whether the actual connotations of machismo within the Mexican culture are changing is minor compared to whether Mexicans can reach a higher truth by negotiating the representation of gender and machismo in their own lives. How machismo is represented can lead to social change as stories are constantly changing.

Keywords: machismo (representations of); male gender (social constructions of); gender representation; Mexico; stylistic techniques (writing); literary journalism

"If Papá gets ill, as he often does, gets killed, as he often does, gets drunk and runs off with la Pancha from the hut next door, as he has been known to do, or if el norte calls him and he vanishes through the fence, as we know all too well he is wont to do, that leaves eight strong arms, and built-in bodyguards and providers for lonesome Mamá"

- *By the Lake of Sleeping Children* (Urrea, 1996)

Luis Alberto Urrea, author of *By the Lake of Sleeping Children*, and Ruben Martinez, author of *Crossing Over: A Mexican Family on the Migrant Trail*, both depict machismo as a primary means of representing the male gender. Consequently, machismo is performed by the characters in Urrea and Martinez's texts. Machismo is a Spanish term used to describe a typically negative stereotype of hyper-masculinity or "traditional masculinity" from the

Western perspective (Basham, 1976). It plays a significant role within Mexican culture and its influences are visible not only in stories told by Urrea and Martinez, but in how Mexicans – the stories within the stories – tell their own stories or narratives. Thus, critical discourse on the genre of literary journalism is useful to illuminate and conceptualize machismo. From this approach, one may contend that the way in which gender and machismo are socially constructed and the stories Mexican men tell themselves about machismo influences their performance of it.

Important questions to consider are how Urrea and Martinez address the complicated issues of gender representation and what literary techniques they employ to investigate the complex construction of Mexican masculinity. For example, how is literary journalism used to tell the stories of Mexican males and provide a credible picture of them? Both Urrea and Martinez are overtly

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subjective in their writing, but they both include random details interspersed in the text that allow the reader to recognize the authors' biases and differentiate between when the author is trying to write impartially and when the attempt to write subjectively is overrun. While the subject of both authors' writing may be "los olvidados" – the forgotten ones – their writing encompasses a broader view of the world and "los olvidados'" relations to it (Urrea, 1996).

The epigraph of this essay demonstrates how difficult it is to separate men's acts of machismo from the effects they have on women. Because of this, women may play a pivotal role in the explanation of machismo. For example, Urrea and Martinez often rely on women for information on the behaviour of their spouses or other males in the household. How machismo affects or distorts spousal or familial relations and dynamics is an important aspect to study. Additionally, women can play a supporting role to machismo in that they perpetuate the ideology by acknowledging its existence and remaining passive. However, women can also deconstruct machismo by being strong and outwardly defiant – they can "upbraid the men" and protect themselves from further abuse¹.

Gender representation becomes increasingly clouded with cultural influences, socioeconomic factors, personal history, and stereotypes. While machismo plays a key role in the shaping of gender representations of men and their behaviours, it would be overly reductive to state that all Mexican men are governed by principles of machismo. However, Urrea and Martinez mention machismo or the "macho male" or the characteristic of one being "macho" so many times in their texts that it must affect enough of the Mexican population to be significant, relevant, and a veritable influencer or principle of behaviour. This idea of machismo warrants investigation as it ultimately affects the representation of the Mexican male gender.

In the past from the Western perspective, machismo was a term that was associated with a characteristically negative stereotype of hyper-masculinity: "The macho is a man who knows more than he tells, who conquers women at his pleasure, who suffers no injustice without response, and who, above all, never [shows] fear" (Basham, 1976). The origin of the term is debatable and some say that the concept of men as "daring, arrogant, unpredictable, and lustful" was introduced to Latin America during the Spanish Conquest by Spanish conquistadores, who were notorious for possessing the aforementioned traits (Falicov, 2010). Others believe that the term machismo belongs to the Golden era of Mexican cinema in the 1950s when machismo as a national identity was created and encouraged to attain international recognition (Falicov, 2010). For example, Mexican *bandidos* – bandits – became a regular feature in American westerns at the time (Shaw, 1989).

More modern day conceptions of machismo based on responses from Mexican university students reveal machismo to be "a perfect label for male chauvinism and the ideology of patriarchy" (Ramirez, 2008). One student describes a macho as a man "who's too possessive ... who

tries to control you – who does not allow you to live freely" (Ramirez, 2008). University students tended to associate machismo with "social backwardness and a stereotype of rural culture" (Ramirez, 2008). One male engineering student thinks of machismo "as a man who's insecure. In some sense, he needs to possess everything because he is not sure of having anything" (Ramirez, 2008). He is someone "who can't accept other people's opinions" (Ramirez, 2008).

Modern explanations of the word machismo become important in combination with old ones, since Urrea and Martinez must first determine what machismo means to them as writers. Their conception of the word is of primary importance, because their definition will provide the basis for "labelling" certain men or activities as "macho." However, how Urrea and Martinez determined their definitions of machismo is not clearly explained in the text. Readers are left to draw their own conclusions of what machismo actually means based on descriptions of "macho" acts and tricky statements in the text such as "machos are sentimentalists like all true fascists" and "machos are philosophers" (Urrea, 1996). Moreover, it would seem that machismo has become part of Mexicans' cultural self or identity; it is a socially prescribed role that many Mexicans may try to fulfill in various ways, if it truly has "become internalized as the public ideal" (Falicov, 2010).

To understand how literary journalism is used to depict machismo – namely how stories or narratives of machismo are told – one must have basic knowledge of the genre. Literary journalism is the amalgamation of literature and journalism to form writing on real events from the subjective perspective of the writer; it contrasts with traditional journalism where an article presents both sides of the story and where the journalist remains neutral, non-judgmental, and emotionless (Zdovc, 2008). Urrea states that his book is about "Poor humans. And it is unashamedly on their side" (Urrea, 1996).

"What we call important news is, as a rule, singularly unimportant to humanity and that which is most important to humanity is not news" (Zdovc, 2008). Literary journalism is important to distinguish from conventional news journalism, because literary journalism is written about the individual's daily life and not just "extraordinary events" (Zdovc, 2008). Going back to the origins of literary journalism, literary journalists held the conviction that it was their duty to "educate and inform the public" and to unmask "hypocrisy and deceptive behaviour" (Zdovc, 2008). Literary journalism – an umbrella term for new journalism and new new journalism – asks new questions, making readers think for themselves and question their preconceived notions of the subject matter (Zdovc, 2008).

According to Tom Wolfe, the "founder" of new journalism, the goal was to intellectually and emotionally stimulate readers (Zdovc, 2008). New journalism introduced a moral vision into journalist reports surpassing the personal involvement previously only alive in novels (Zdovc, 2008). "Their texts reflected social unrest and disorder [attempting to 'transmit a message through form']" (Zdovc, 2008). The

four main devices for writing new journalism are scene-by-scene construction, extensive character dialogue, third person point of view, and recording status life (Zdovc, 2008).

After Wolfe, the next generation of journalists emerged, expanding and improving the reporting methods of new journalists. New new journalists are renowned for increasing their involvement with characters so much that “the public/private divide essentially disappeared” (Boynton, 2005). “Wolfe went inside his character’s heads; the New New Journalists became part of their lives” (Boynton, 2005). For example, Urrea is Chicano and his “writing about the slums is legitimated” by serving the Mexican people as Pastor Von’s assistant and by living amongst them for long periods of time as a close friend². Moreover, unlike new journalism, new new journalism explores distinctions of race and class (Boynton, 2005). New new journalism also has more of an “activist dimension” to it (Boynton, 2005).

The “Incident at San Antonio” is a perfect example of how telling stories – recounted through the medium of literary journalism – embodies the performance of machismo. Urrea relays rather humorously an instance where machismo fails, illustrating how when the man is in a subordinate position, he still shows aggression, superiority, and hyper-masculinity. In this “Incident,” a woman is told not to touch a man’s car, but she drives off in it despite his drunken berating. This incident may challenge the traditional stereotype that Latin American women are helpless and subordinate. In fact, “most of the women in Urrea’s book do not construct or maintain machismo because he celebrates and admires feisty, independent women”³.

While humour may be a stylistic device used to illustrate the ridiculousness of machismo in the “Incident,” Urrea also utilizes all four of the previously mentioned stylistic devices. The “Incident” progresses scene-by-scene, complete with a play-by-play dialogue where Urrea has removed himself from the text and described the gestures, habits, and manners of the drunken, unemployed men sitting on the wooden bench. This incident is a direct illustration of how macho men “perform” for one another and can be seen in the condensed version below (Urrea, 1996):

He ... flung his arms out as if exasperated by her nagging. ‘What do you want?’ he sneered, in a ploy obviously intended more for his compadres than for her. They looked quite pleased with him ... The compadres were impressed with him, that much was obvious ... ‘All right! Fine! But don’t even think about bringing the car back!’ The compadres were delighted. ‘You told her!’ they cried, slapping his back, opening more beers ... ‘The man,’ he said, sighing, ‘is always on top. That’s just the way it is.’

Another example of men performing is when Mario narrates a macho tale of how he tells off his German boss in the field. “[Everyone] ... know[s] that the kid is about to start spinning a tall tale, but this actually makes the story all the

more enjoyable” (Martinez, 2001). Both this “tale” and the “Incident at San Antonio” raise the question of how much of stereotyped masculine behaviour is “felt deeply and how much of it is obligatory performance?” (Falicov, 2010). In both Mario’s and the other man’s situations, they were not in control, but yet they pretended they were – or in Mario’s case changed the story – to “save face” and defend their honour. The aforementioned examples illustrate how machismo can differ in intentionality and how literary journalism can give us access to those intentions. In Mario’s case, he is imaginarily standing up for his rights against an abusive boss – so he is positively performing machismo – whereas in the “Incident at San Antonio” the man is berating a woman for driving off in his car – a much more negative performance of machismo.

In Martinez’s book, “Efraín Chávez was, simply, a demented dictator” – a view arrived at by Martinez based on María Elena’s descriptions (Martinez, 2001). He was an alcoholic, an abuser and perhaps a machista – the sexist, boisterous, selfish type – or the epitome of a macho at his very worst. “‘This is all true,’” doña María tells me. It’s good enough for a movie” (Martinez, 2001). Between María Elena and Martinez as the narrator, one or both of them may need to convince readers of Efraín’s character on the basis of verifiable sources and their own personal integrity. They might say to the readers, “All this actually did happen, so do not blame me if it does not seem real,” because Efraín’s character was so atrocious and cruel that disbelieving or overly critical readers may think María’s stories of her husband are implausible (Zdovc, 2008).

“Unemployed men sit here all day and drink beer. (It has always seemed a miracle to me that Mexican men, without one cent, produce enough money to get thoroughly drunk)” (Urrea, 1996). Alcoholism, machismo, and displays of violence all more or less appear to go hand and hand in both Urrea and Martinez’s books. Timothy Mitchell’s research explores the correlation between alcohol and violence or spousal abuse among Mexicans. He found that “in Chamula ... episodes of domestic violence were only taken seriously if they occurred in the absence of alcohol. If people could say of a man that he had struck his wife while sober, then they knew he truly had evil in his heart” (Mitchell, 2004). However, why is inebriation a socially acceptable excuse for domestic violence and spousal abuse? It was also noted that in colonial Michoacán, “the normal and expected ritual prelude to a beating was a drinking bout” (Mitchell, 2004). In María Elena’s case, she claimed “Jesus was one of the only men she knew of who didn’t drink himself into a stupor and beat women ... She often ... [prayed] that her husband would die” (Martinez, 2001).

The Mexican fiesta is indisputably one, big demonstration of machismo. It is a town-wide celebration in honor of saints, Jesus or the Virgin Mary (Perez, 2000). A large part of the fiesta has to do with public worship, family, “social and political prestige,” and of course drinking (Perez, 2000). “The fiesta,” says Rosa biting, “swallows up the men. They’re all a bunch of drunkards this time of year”

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(Martinez, 2001). Food, drink, dance, alcohol, and music are all characteristic of the religious celebration, along with violence and domestic abuse (Perez, 2000). At fiestas, girls and women are both “at the beck and call of the men. They run errands, help men off to the side to urinate or vomit, drag their passed-out bodies out of the way of other participants, and help them stumble home at the end of the night” (Mitchell, 2004).

Moreover, at fiestas, it has been observed that there is always at least one outbreak of violence often directed towards women (Mitchell, 2004). Mexican women are aware of the perpetual abuse that fiesta brings, yet they oppress themselves by their resignation and acceptance of the Mexican “custom” of the women and girls to always help the men (Perez, 2000). Mexican women claim that the woman is not allowed to shame the man in front of his friends even if “he has shamed himself” (Perez, 2000). Perhaps this indicates how deeply engrained machismo is in the Mexican culture and to what degree it is exacerbated by alcohol, leading to violence and spousal abuse.

Conversely, instead of saying that machismo is exacerbated by alcohol consumption, one may say that alcoholism is used as a coping mechanism to deal with always feeling compelled to play the socially prescribed role of “macho man.” For example, after abandoning the construction of Consuelo’s coffin, Manuel continues to drink tequila and cry; he says, “I don’t give a shit” (Urrea, 1996). Even if Manuel’s sadness is not due to Consuelo’s accidental death, perhaps he cares and is sad about other things in life. “The macho is frequently aware of a conflict between his persona of bravado and his inner feelings” (Basham, 1976). One man admits: “At times we want to be very strong and very macho, but at the bottom we are not ... Many drown themselves in drink and others grab a pistol and shoot themselves, because they cannot bear what they feel inside” (Basham, 1976).

Martinez refers to twenty-eight year old Ambrosio as “apparently alcoholic”; like many other Mexicans, he had a hard life (Martinez, 2001). When Chacho’s brother Eduardo dies – a result of the performance of machismo getting out of control – it was said that “Chacho would be drinking plenty that night and the next. People would steer clear of his robber’s cabin, because Chacho would be in the mood to shoot” (Urrea, 1996). Similarly, after the death of his brothers in the accident, Florentino admits he was soon drinking himself to sleep, but “the memories came back to him, drink or no drink,” which is clear proof of a faulty coping mechanism (Martinez, 2001). Additionally, Martinez describes José Izquierdo one night as “knocking back tequila with beer chasers with reckless frequency. This was no longer a party but a desperate attempt to outrun the phantoms gaining on him” (Martinez, 2001).

Literary journalism makes readers “consider social circumstances,” such as social injustices (Zdovc, 2008). For example, could machismo be a facade of toughness created to help cope with reality or poor living conditions? Could machismo function as a facade for inner feelings or is

machismo simply a coping mechanism itself? For José Izquierdo it hides hurt, especially with the loss of Laura – the girl “he planned to marry when it was finally time to settle down” – to a man from Uruapan (Martinez, 2001).

Nineteen-year old Wense Cortez “is the most volatile and variable” (Martinez, 2001). He is a darker, poor migrant, who has had some bad breaks and has a hard time supporting his family. Martinez without further explanation says “Wense has a mean streak in him” (Martinez, 2001). Martinez also finds it ironic that “Rosa, the wife of Wense, the most outwardly macho man of the clan ... was first allowed to accompany her husband [to the US]” (Martinez, 2001). One of the reasons why Wense says he is so angry all the time is because his “family is poorer than you can imagine” (Martinez, 2001). Can being angry be seen as a motivator of adopting the act of machismo?

One recent journal article on constructions of Latino masculinity argues that machismo is a stereotype that is overly simplistic in its definition of Latino masculinity and in fact is a construction that is changing; not all Latino men fit the machismo stereotype. According to Falicov, there are positive and negative attributes of machismo. The negative attributes ... [include] bravado, violence, selfishness, disrespect, irresponsibility, and cowardliness (Falicov, 2010). Positive aspects of machismo include “honor, respect, responsibility, and altruism” (Falicov, 2010).

Based on the aforementioned characteristics, there may be positive machos in Urrea and Martinez’s work. For example, Braulio demonstrates positive attributes of machismo; Juanita says he is a “good boy” and “the pastor likes Braulio – he can see a good heart in him” (Urrea, 1996). Even though Braulio is only fourteen, he is still “manly” in the sense that he not only thinks about having sex with Perla, but he even thinks about taking care of her and raising her baby as if it were his own. Additionally, after the house burns down it is he who takes charge of all the men “who stand around gawking” (Urrea, 1996).

Thirty-one year old Fernando is a positive macho man; he is a “hombre” – respectful and protective of women and family, and self-sacrificing (Falicov, 2010). Martinez says, “Fernando breaks the type the other way – he’s anything but the macho. If he wears a mask at all, it is one of quiet stoicism” (Martinez, 2001). Martinez’s judgment of Fernando comes early on in the book – at the point where he is just meeting the Chávez family. The mask is important as literary journalist Leon Dash notes, because “unless you’re able to get someone to remove his public mask, your story won’t reflect his genuine motivation” (Boynton, 2005).

According to Ramirez (2008), machismo was associated with less modern and less educated, older generations. Although even Wense appears to be represented as overly macho with negative connotations, being from the “new generation,” he is part of the movement of men who are beginning to break free from the conventions of machismo and treat women respectfully. Wense was the first man of the Chávez family to let his wife travel with him to America, which is a very liberal decision. Near the end of the

book, Wense says to Martinez, “You know, I’m really doing something” (Martinez, 2001):

He’s stopped drinking, his wild years are over. He swears he’s not going to wind up like so many drunk fathers back in Cherán or so many solos wandering around the States futureless. He’s working ... nine hours a day, including a lot of Sundays lately. He says he wants to move into a new apartment, where it’ll be just him, Rosa, and Yeni ... He wants to buy a new car ... And he wants to send Yeni to a parochial school ... Yes, Wense swears he’s going to make something of himself.

This happy ending raises the question of whether Wense is an idealized new form of man that Martinez is envisioning (more so in his mind) or is Wense a genuine example of changing constructions of masculinity? Regardless, “the cultural emphasis on familismo ... [the] investment in and devotion to family relationships may be more powerful than machismo” (Falicov, 2010).

Loretta Panhorse, an American who works in the greenhouses of Thompson Farms, “noticed something ... that truly bothered her: the way the Mexican men treat their women, the way the women allow themselves to be treated” (Martinez, 2001). Loretta says, “that’s not how we act up here,” but what she fails to take into consideration is that machismo acts to inform women of societal expectations of men (Martinez, 2001). For example, women must expect and overlook infidelity and abuse for the continuity of the family (Basham, 1976). Proof of this infidelity may lie in the macho boasting that “no one falls back in love with their wives ... not after all the women we have had” (Urrea, 1996). Urrea challenges this macho negation of true love in his more fictionalized and visionary novella through the character Don Manuel in “A Day in the Life.” Don Manuel tells his compadre Lalo that he loves Doña Juana – his forty-two year old wife – who is missing seven teeth and has hair turning white and saggy breasts (Urrea, 1996).

Some women pride themselves on being able to live with an abusive husband – one woman says, “a woman who is beaten and quits is not a real woman” (Mitchell, 2004). It is almost paradoxical that in Mexico a “strong” woman is seen as a submissive one, while someone from a modern Western perspective would declare that a “strong” woman is an active one who opposes tyranny and fights injustice. An example of this toleration of hardship and a woman’s fortitude is found in the instance of a man who had “continually found fault with his wife’s cooking [and] beat her almost daily. On his return home one day, Doña Petra overheard his wife remark, ‘Do you beat me now and we eat later, or do we eat now and you beat me when we finish?’” (Mitchell, 2004). Oddly, in the aforementioned example, the woman is being simultaneously submissive and defiant. Perhaps this indicates that the line between being submissive and assertive is constantly blurred and the negotiation of

gender roles – such as that of the macho man and obedient wife – is a precarious endeavour.

Similarly, Negra’s “scar is a constant reminder of [her] steely will. Her lover once cheated on her ... In the manner of many couples in the area, he’d cajoled Negra into tattooing his name on herself, to show whose woman she was” (Urrea, 1996). She melted his name out of her skin with a hot spoon; “when he came home, she showed him her arm and asked if he planned to cheat on her again” (Urrea, 1996). When Negra confronts her lover about infidelity, asking “if he planned to cheat on her again,” she is challenging and even threatening him. While these stories may seem humorous to the reader, they function to reinforce the concept of women as property of men – a concept that can be derived from machismo. However, Urrea twists some of these stories to challenge machismo as a status quo, when according to the conventions of machismo, Negra should really just suffer in silence. For many, the treatment of women by Mexican men is demoralizing and degrading – so much that La Lupe dreams of building a hacienda for “every woman who was ever wronged by a macho fuck” (Martinez, 2001).

Lastly, Fanny Gooch, who lived in Mexico for seven years and wrote a book, illustrates the differences in the treatment of women in Mexico and the United States by describing the windows of a traditional Mexican house. She says, “our windows were also furnished on the outside with iron rods, similar to those used for jails in the United States, and quite as effective, while those of many of our neighbours had only heavy wooden bars, so close together as scarcely to permit the hand to pass between them. These, I was told by a Mexican lady, were called the ‘jealous husbands’ windows” (Cabañas, 2008). Thus, Gooch alludes to the social entrapment of women and the resignation of women – who will point out the function of the windows – to these restrictions of freedom based on dominant societal traits (Cabañas, 2008).

According to Urrea, Martinez, and other literary journalists, “the story comes from spending thousands of hours in the life” and Urrea, in particular, has stated that he “tried to use novelistic techniques to get at a deeper truth” (Urrea, 1996). Wolfe states that “the credibility of a writer depends upon the writer’s experience and intellect, his insights, the quality of his emotions, [and] his ability to see into others ...” (Wolfe, 1973). While literary journalism’s goal is to “understand the worlds of other people from within and move outwards to understand and show those people as they understand themselves,” based on analysis of Urrea and Martinez’s books, there may be limitations to the genre of literary journalism (Zdovc, 2008).

Consequently, one may suspect that while Martinez’s writing appears to be “subjective, open-hearted, witty, informal, ironic, intimate, and trustworthy,” he may have a tendency to favor the American side thus producing a narrower view (Zdovc, 2008). While many men in Martinez’s book are simply represented as “bad men with mean streaks who are alcoholics and abusive,” Falicov’s

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article explores a case study of one man with his therapist to uncover belief systems, motivations and reasons for why a man is the way he is. His article offers a refreshing perspective in contrast to Martinez's descriptions which are very cut-and-dry or callous at times. The exploration of the past through this particular case study actually helps humanize the Latino man. In essence, it reveals the motivations and feelings often hidden under a tough exterior.

Is Martinez oversimplifying his portrayals of men in his book and assuming that readers will trust his judgment of character? One literary journalist describes his ways of writing as an "arrogant act," because "[he] is saying to the reader, 'I'll figure out what's significant and what's not. And I'll build a path through it so you don't have to suffer through the same confusion I did'" (Boynton, 2005). Does this attitude help or hinder the reader in determining whether an author is a reliable narrator? Even though Martinez is often around when men are drunk, break down, and confess all to him, his initial description of men is still very bare bones and rationalization of behaviour often comes much later in the text if at all. Even if Martinez is using a stylistic technique that limits the reader's understanding of how he reached his conclusions for the sake of simplicity, is it still possible for his writing to lead to a greater truth?

Nevertheless, perhaps the most important message to take away from this analysis of the representation of machismo in the literary journalism of Urrea and Martinez, is that "even if literary journalism is not capable of leading to truth, it can lead people to find their own truths" (Boynton, 2005). Thus, whether connotations of machismo within Mexican culture are actually changing for the better is minor in comparison to whether Mexicans can reach a higher truth by negotiating the representation of gender and machismo in their own lives. Consequently, the representation of gender and machismo in the Mexicans' own lives can lead to social change since the stories by which they lead their lives are constantly changing.

Endnotes

1. Personal communication with M. Nandorfy.
2. Personal communication with M. Nandorfy.
3. Personal communication with M. Nandorfy.

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