

VAN LUYN, Ariella

**PhD Candidate, Queensland University of Technology, Queensland University of
Technolgy, K503, Musk Avenue, Kelvin Grove, Queensland, Australia 4059**

Phone: 0401925228

E-mail: a1.vanluyn@qut.edu.au

Language of presentation: English

State if you are a member of IOHA or COHA: NO

Necessary equipment: Computer and PowerPoint slide projector

Sub-theme: Methodological, archaival, technical issues, Theory and methods in OH, Legal and Ethical issues

Artful Shaping: The Ethics of Fictionalising Oral History

This paper consists of a description of a specific project and engages with the conference theme of theory and method in oral history—legal and ethical issues.

The paper documents the development of an ethical framework for my current PhD project. I am a practice-led researcher with a background in creative writing. My project involves conducting a number of oral history interviews with individuals living in Brisbane, Queensland, Australia. I use the interviews to inform a novel set in Brisbane. In doing so, I hope to provide a lens into a cultural and historical space by creating a rich, textured and vivid narrative while still retaining some of the essential aspects of the oral history.

In developing a methodology for fictionalising these oral histories, I have encountered a diverse range of ethical issues. In particular I have had to confront my role as a writer and researcher working with other people's stories. In order to grapple with the complex ethics of such an engagement, I examine the devices and strategies employed by other creative practitioners working in similar fields. I focus chiefly on Miguel Barnet's *Biography of a Runaway Slave* (published in English in 1968) Dave Eggers' *What is the what: The autobiography of Valentino Achek Deng, a novel* (2005) in order to understand the complex processes of mediation involved in the artful shaping of oral histories. The paper explores how I have confronted and resolved ethical considerations in my theoretical and creative work.

El Modelado Creativo: La Etica de Ficcionalización de la Historia Oral

Este manuscrito consiste en la descripción de un proyecto específico vinculado al tema de la conferencia - asuntos legales y éticos de la teoría y método en la historia oral.

Este manuscrito documenta el desarrollo del sistema ético de mi actual proyecto doctoral. Soy una investigadora práctica con experiencia en arte creativo. My proyecto comprende la realización de entrevistas de historia oral con residentes de Brisbane, en Queensland, Australia, las cuales utilizo para crear una novela que se desarrolla en Brisbane. Mi objetivo es brindar una ventana a un espacio histórico y cultural a través de una narrativa de rica y vívida textura que retiene el aspecto esencial de la historia oral.

Al desarrollar la metodología para llevar estas historias orales a la ficción, diversas cuestiones éticas surgieron. En particular mi papel de escritora e investigadora me presentó el desafío de tener que trabajar con la historia de otras personas. Para contender con las complejas cuestiones éticas que surgieron, tuve que examinar las estrategias y recursos empleados por otros practicantes creativos que han realizado trabajos similares. Para poder comprender mejor los procesos de mediación que demanda el modelado artístico de las historias orales, mi manuscrito se enfocó principalmente en el trabajo de Miguel Barnet titulado “*Biografía de un cimarrón*” (publicado en Inglés en 1968) y en la novela de Dave Eggers “What is what: The autobiography of Valentino Achek Deng” (2005). Mi manuscrito explora la forma en que tuve que manejar y resolver las cuestiones éticas relacionadas con mi trabajo teórico y creativo.

Paper:

This paper describes the development of an ethical framework for the practice-led research project, *The Artful Life Story: Oral History and Fiction*. I am a creative writer, working with oral histories to inform the creation of a novel set in Brisbane, capital city of Queensland, Australia. I came to the field of oral history almost by accident. I had signed up for a vacation research project exploring the Arts in Health, facilitated through the Queensland University of Technology (QUT), and found myself interviewing three Sisters of Mercy at Brisbane’s Mater Hospital. I was fascinated by the compelling quality of the Sisters’ spoken stories. I hoped to be able to capture something of this powerful oral quality in my own fiction.

Later, as I began my research in earnest as a PhD candidate, I came to see that, as Michael Frisch (2008, 223) claims, ‘oral history tapes [are] . . . precious documentation that [are] inaccessible and generally unlistened to.’ Early in 2009, I approached the Queensland Police Museum, Brisbane, to discuss conducting an interview with a retired police officer (a member of the public had approached the Oral History Association of Australia, Brisbane branch, of which I am a member, suggesting the interview). The curator informed me that while she had a number of oral history interviews on file, she had neither the staff nor the resources to make them available to the general public. They were stored in a drawer in the curator’s office. In their present form, as unedited audio tapes, they would make a poor museum display.

As a result of these experiences, I set out with two aims for my research project. One is to offer a method for rendering oral history transcripts more accessible and engaging.¹ I hoped to broaden oral histories’ appeal to readers of fiction by imaginatively filling in the gaps in the

¹ Digital storytelling could be said to be another method.

oral testimonies and inventing scenes, narratives and characters. The other aim is to draw on oral histories to augment my writing. Oral histories are rich sources of personal details of lived experience. These descriptions are often not present in traditional historical documents. Oral histories have the potential to imbue works of fiction with authentic and intimate details of a particular time and place, and to reveal vocal strategies that lend oral tales their captivating quality. What concerned me deeply as I was designing this project was the problem of writer as mediator. Although I had successfully gained ethical clearance from my university for the project, I felt I had not directly addressed this concern in my application. In the process of fictionalisation, am I intervening in someone else's story, effectively silencing them? Am I essentially 'stealing' other people's stories?

To answer this question, I closely examine instances of writers engaged in similar acts of artistic re-presentation and invention, and consider some reactions their texts provoked. Examples of texts in which the writer is creatively shaping another's life story include John Neihardt's *Black Elk Speaks* (1932), Miguel Barnet's *Biography of a Runaway Slave* (published in English in 1968), Mick Brown and Terry Whitebeach's *Bantam* (2000) and Dave Eggers' *What is the What* (2005). It is beyond the scope of this paper to examine all these works. Instead, I investigate two examples, *Biography of a Runaway Slave*² and *What is the What*. Despite their disparity in publication date and geographical location, I found the issues raised in their production allowed me to develop an ethical scaffold for my own research endeavours. I examine why the author was engaged in the task of fictionalising oral history, some of the responses the texts provoked and what benefits, if any, resulted from their publication.

Miguel Barnet's *Biography of a Runaway Slave*

In 1963, Miguel Barnet, a Cuban anthropologist and writer, interviewed Esteban Montejo, a former slave who had worked on a sugar plantation. Montejo was 103 years old at the time and could neither read nor write. Originally written in Spanish, the text was translated into English in 1968, under the title *Autobiography of a Runaway Slave*. It was re-translated and printed again in English in 1994, when the title was changed to *Biography of a Runaway Slave*, which more accurately reflected the Spanish title and the complex process of shaping that occurred in the text.

² Please note that although the text was originally published in Spanish as *Biografía de un Cimarrón*, I will be examining the English translation as I don't speak the language. I have also had to limit my reading to resources about the book in English.

Biography of a Runaway Slave reads as though it is a first person autobiographical account. The opening lines (1968, 17), for example, seem to offer the reader unmediated access to Montejo's speaking voice:

There are things in life I do not understand. Everything in nature seems obscure to me, and the gods even more. They're the ones that are supposed to give birth to all the things that a person sees, that I seen and that do exist for sure.

This rambling tone and emphasis on spoken habits, such as interjection and repetition, is maintained throughout the text. Only when *Biography of a Runaway Slave* is examined on a meta-textual level do the 'tensions at work beneath the polished surface' as Feal (1990, 109) describes them, become apparent.

Barnet (cited in Millay 2005, 121) describes how he went about producing the text in *Biography of a Runaway Slave* as a 'decanted' version of Montejo's interview:

[*Biography of a Runaway Slave*] is based on spoken language . . . but this spoken language is 'decanted.' I would never write a book by producing exactly what is on the audiotape. I would take the tone of language and the anecdotes from that tape; the style and nuances are always my own contribution.

Millay (2005, 133) claims that 'the resulting text represents a fictionalising of the oral narrative.' In addition, Barnet deleted sections of the interview that could not be proved; he 'extracted unverifiable material from the text to create the effect of realism' (Millay 2005, 137). Barnet (cited in Millay 2005, 141) also describes how he wanted to achieve an effect of spontaneity, 'as if it had come from the heart.' Paradoxically, he uses an artificial process to achieve this effect.³ Barnet 'inserted words and expressions characteristic of Esteban whenever they seemed appropriate' (ibid). Prologues and headings in the work also indicate Barnet's implicit involvement in the shaping of the narrative. Chapters are arranged chronologically, and material is placed under headings. Despite this, scholars such as William Luis (1989, 478) note how the narrative 'represents a collapse in historical time in which the past and present are brought together,' which is a strategy of memory rather than historical discourse.

As a result, there is a strong 'oral feel' to the work. Millay (2005, 141) suggests how this is achieved:

³ Rosemary Feal (1990, 101) notes a similar paradox: in order to create an authentic, literary version of a real life, the ethnobiographer, here Barnet, must in a way be unfaithful to the original words spoken.

Repetitions, interjections, colloquial sayings, flashbacks, epithets, allusions to multiple variations of myths, false starts, rhetorical questions, digressions, moralistic conclusions, onomatopoeic interjections, temporal imprecision, syntax and ellipses are some of the means of achieving a mimesis of spoken discourse by creating a rhetorical effect of reality. *Biography of a Runaway Slave* can be read as a written performance of the stylistics of oral storytelling.

Biography of a Runaway Slave has proved resistant to classification. Barnet (1996, 207) himself described the work as a 'testimonial novel.' Barnet (ibid) claimed this form of writing 'reworks several traditional concepts of literature: realism, autobiography, the relationship between fiction and history.' Barnet (ibid) believed that the function of the testimonial novel is 'to give back the original sound of storytelling to the contemporary novel.' Roberto González Echevarría (1980, 254) concurs, describing the text as a *narrative de testimonio*, 'roughly the documentary novel; a literature that is both testimonial in the sense that of being a witness account and a kind of memorial.' *Biography of a Runaway Slave* has been classified by Feal (1990, 101) as an 'ethnobiography': an ethnologist's written version of an individual's oral autobiography. In her description of the genre, Feal (ibid) notes the ethnobiography can be classified both by its closeness to the original oral discourse and the 'remontage or reassembly of the material into a text that perhaps uses fictional devices.' All these attempts at classification reveal the tension between literary and historical writing present in *Biography of a Runaway Slave*. As Nick Hill (1996, 12) claims, in writing *Biography of a Runaway Slave*, Barnet 'staked out the broad dimensions of the debates that have since taken place over the complex dynamics of literature's relationship to history with regard to the voice of the oppressed.'

Why did Barnet choose to present Montejo's narrative in this way? What was his purpose in creating a 'literary version of a real life' (Feal 1990, 101)? In the postscript of the 1987 Argentine edition of *Biography of a Runaway Slave*, Barnet states that Montejo's death in 1973 at age 113, marks 'the abolition of slavery in Cuba . . . since Cuba was the last country to overcome this affront to the human condition . . . with this present edition, I want to pay modest personal homage to that action . . . a victory won by the oppressed, by the slaves (cited in Hill 1994, 13). Essentially, Barnet was claiming to be writing for the oppressed, not simply about them. He was deeply concerned with creating an authentic voice in the text. Barnet (1994, 207) declared in the Afterword:

Let the people, for whom I write, recognise themselves in my voice and discover there that their demons are pacified in the substance of time.

Feal (1990, 107) likewise notes that Montejo represents a collective experience, despite being a loner who escaped slavery to live in the woods. Georg M. Gugelberger and Michael Kearney (1991, 4) claim that testimonial literature is at once an authentic and empowering narrative, 'told by a witness who is moved to narrate by the urgency of the situation.' The mode offers a way for those on the margins of the empire to 'write back' (ibid). A highly edited, even fictionalised account, comes to stand for a collective experience and is at the same time highly readable.

However, I would argue that while Barnett no doubt had noble intentions, his claim of 'writing for the people' is highly problematic. Montejo could not read the interview transcript to confirm this was an accurate representation. As has been noted, Barnett paid greater attention to the 'oral feel' of the transcript, attempting to recreate a voice that, he claimed, was reflective of Montejo's own. This claim, however, is impossible to substantiate; the oral transcripts of the interview do not exist. Barnett's presence as an author is ever-present. His name, not Montejo's, appears on the front of the text.

An understanding of Montejo's author-like role contributes to the debate on writing others' life stories. The case demonstrates the need to preserve transcripts if re-shaping is to occur. *Biography of a Runaway Slave* also proves that in particular contexts, using fictional techniques to re-present another's life story may, in fact, undermine the purposes and claims of the author to be speaking with their subject's voice. However, I argue that in other cases, the process of fictionalising oral histories may work successfully to achieve a highly readable account that still retains some essential aspects and authenticity of the interview. Dave Eggers' *What is the What* may be an example of one of these instances, and an examination of his methodology may shed light on my own task of writing fiction informed by oral histories.

Dave Eggers' *What is the What: The Autobiography of Valentino Achak Deng: A Novel*

Eggers, author of novels such as *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* (2000) uses interviews, conversations and e-mails with Valentino Achak Deng, a Lost Boy from Sudan, as the basis for his fictional work, *What is the What*. Unlike the previous example, Deng, through Mary Williams of the Lost Boys Foundation, approached Eggers to write the novel. Deng hoped to raise awareness of the plight of refugees in Sudan by relating his own experiences, but he felt his written English was not up to the task (Larson n.d., 2). After trying to write Deng's story as a work of non-fiction, Eggers came to the conclusion that the only way he could write the text was to write it as a work of fiction. He chooses to flag the fictional nature of the work in the book's title, which, like the classifications of *Biography of a Runaway Slave*, contains a paradox: 'autobiography' and 'novel.' The oxymoron makes

apparent the text's blurring of the lines between fiction and non-fiction. In an essay published in *The Guardian* the year the book was realised, 'It was Just Boys Walking,' Eggers (2007) describes how he went about fictionalising Deng's account.

Eggers (2007) states that 'the first decision made . . . was to have Valentino narrate his story. His voice was so distinctive and powerful that any other way of telling it would be criminally weak by comparison.' However, critics such as Lee Siegal (2007) point out the approximate nature of Deng's voice. Siegal (2007) claims that 'Eggers voice is all over the novel' and even goes so far as to compare excerpts from Eggers' earlier memoir, *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* (2000) with sections from *What is the What*, to demonstrate a similarity of rhythm, syntax and themes in the voices of both works. In fact, Siegal (ibid, 53) believes that Deng 'does not really exist in *What is the What*.' In an interview, I believe Deng effectively makes null Siegal's criticisms, pointing out that the purpose of the novel was not simply to recreate his story but to create a highly readable novel that would alert readers to the plight of the Lost Boys.

Interviewed with Eggers, Deng (2009) states that *What is the What*:
is very close to the truth, but many things in the book are somewhat different than what happened in life. Some characters have been combined. Some time is compressed. They are minor things, but they were necessary. For one thing, I was very young when the book begins, so I could not remember conversations and small details from my early childhood in Marial Bai. It was necessary to reconstruct the chronology, and that is what Dave did. He took the basic facts and then created the story from there.

Deng (cited in Thompson 2006) says that 'I'm not only about myself in the book.' By this he means that the purpose of the novel was not only to tell his story, but to create a universal and accessible account about the devastation so many people had endured (ibid). Deng gave Eggers permission to 'do whatever he wanted' with his narrative (ibid).

Eggers (2007) also discusses his own concern, when writing the text, of the gaps in the story. Eggers (ibid) says that Valentino was only six years old when he began his journey to Ethiopia, and his memory of the time was 'spotty . . . clunky, spare and full of holes.' Nor could Valentino remember 'who said what at almost any point in his life' (ibid). Eggers (ibid) felt that without any 'sensory detail or dialogue, the book would be parched, and likely to reach only those already interested in the issues of Sudan.' Eggers (ibid) felt that the only way he could write Valentino's story was through the use of fiction and imagination:

Only with a bit of artistic licence could I imagine the thoughts in Valentino's mind the first day he left home, fleeing from the militias, never to return. Only in a novel could I imagine the look on the face of the man who rescued Valentino when he became entangled in barbed wire one black night in the middle of his journey to Ethiopia. Only in a novel could I apply what I had seen in the various regions of Southern Sudan to describe the land, the light, the people.

Eggers, in fact, felt that he needed to blur the lines of fact and fiction because he couldn't write the book any other way. Eggers (cited in Thompson 2006) states 'that it occurred to him that all the books we remember about war and the biggest events in the twentieth century are novels.'

If the aim of *What is the What* was to raise awareness of the atrocities in Sudan, it certainly achieved its purpose. The novel made the bestseller lists in amazon.com, *Booksense*, *Chicago Tribune*, *New York Times*, *Northern California Independent Booksellers Association*, *San Francisco Chronicle* and the *Washington Post*. Eggers also donated, and continues to donate, all the profits from *What is the What* to Deng, who used them to establish the Valentino Achak Deng Foundation in 2006. The foundation works to improve access to education in Southern Sudan.

The creation of *What is the What* demonstrates one methodology for fictionalising oral history that minimalises some of the problems of the earlier example. Most importantly, the subject of the text, Deng, had input into the construction of the work and gave explicit permission for Eggers to write the text in the way he chose. Eggers acknowledges his role as author of this text, which essentially functions as a version of Deng's story. Unlike Barnet, Eggers does not claim to faithfully represent his subject, acknowledging *What is the What* is a novel. Both Deng and Eggers agree that the aim of the work had wider implications than a simple representation of one person's life. Rather, fiction was used to create both an accessible and universal account that draws on interviews to imbue the work with meaning and authenticity. *What is the What* created media interest in the plight of the Sudanese people, and generated opportunities for Deng himself to speak about his life story and the creation of the book. Unlike *Biography of a Runaway Slave* the text enabled Deng's own voice (as well as an approximation of his voice in the text) to be heard.

A methodology for fictionalising oral history

The two case studies were written by people who saw themselves as authors of the text, and gave themselves license (acknowledged or unacknowledged as the case may be) to re-write,

to essentially fictionalise, another's life story. But what of historians who use oral history? How might their role in the production of the text be understood? Alessandro Portelli (2006, 40) writes a great deal on the subject, stating that 'the control of historical discourse remains firmly in the hands of the historian . . . Instead of discovering sources, oral historians partly create them.' Portelli also describes how the historian (interviewer) shapes the narrator's (interviewee's) oral testimony; 'the documents of oral history are always the result of a relationship, of a shared project in which the interviewer and interviewee are involved together' (Portelli 2006, 39). In other words, mediation in both the creation and presentation of oral history texts is unavoidable.

In conclusion, regardless of the discipline in which they are being explored, oral histories must be treated with respect because a process of mediation is unavoidable. In order to 'do justice' to oral histories an understanding of the historical and cultural context in which they occur is vital. The product developed from the oral histories should be scaffolded around this understanding. In my own project, I have developed a methodology where I conduct some initial research before the interview. During the interview, I encourage the interviewee to guide the direction of the conversation so they talk about the aspects of their lives they wish to talk about and then conduct close and well-researched readings of the interview transcript before sitting down to write. In approaching the task of writing, I experiment with a number of fictional strategies, writing my way through to a style that seems to best reflect the interview.

The examples also raise the question: how much control should the interviewees have over the final product? In the case of *What is the What*, Deng appears to have had a lot of input in the initial stages of the creation of the work; Eggers would interview, ring or e-mail Deng to confirm details (Eggers 2007). Deng then gave permission for Eggers to do what he wanted with his story. In order to maintain a balance between retaining the essentials of the interview and authorial intervention, it is essential to work with an interviewee who is happy to have their story fictionalised. Deng's statement 'do what you want!' is the ideal interviewee attitude in a process of fictionalisation. In my own project, I would hesitate about working with interviewees who were in any way uncomfortable with the process. Trust is essential and can be established over the phone and during the interview. I also found that being open about the process and having an example of my writing (I showed participants a story I'd written based on interviews with my Grandma) was useful in conveying my purpose. I make sure that participants are aware of what I intend to do with their oral histories. I post or e-mail a

transcript of the interview to participants, so they have the opportunity to review their words and delete anything they don't wish me to fictionalise.

As the examples demonstrate, interview transcripts should be made available if any kind of process of alteration, for whatever purpose, is to take place. In my case, this ensures that the fictional text does not 'silence' the oral history transcript. Rather, an artistic representation such as mine augments rather than replaces the interviewee's story. The events described are represented in two types of symbolic language, one an oral history transcript/tape, the other a fictional text. I intend to work in a similar manner. As with the example of *Biography of a Runaway Slave*, grandiose claims about speaking with the voice of a participant or a people can rarely be substantiated, especially if the subject cannot read what has been written. I do not argue that the project should never have been attempted. It may be that readers would never have heard of Montejo's plight if it had not been recorded and published. Rather, I feel that the process of fictionalisation should have been made overt and that some attempt should have been made to allow the subject's own voice to be heard, perhaps through the later publication of original transcripts or a statement endorsing the text. In my project, this means it is important to situate the creative piece in a context that explains that it is a work of fiction and that names have been changed.

Unlike Barnet and Eggers, I don't make claims to empower through my oral history. Instead, I am interested in using oral history to explore a place: the city of Brisbane. As a result of reading these texts, I have changed the way I conceive of my use of oral histories. I had initially thought that oral histories were something that could be 'used' in fiction. Now, I see oral histories as sources that can imbue fiction with authenticity and details not often present in traditional historical resources. My methodology, particularly in how I conducted interviews, arose from these considerations.

Bibliography

Barnet, M. 1994. *Biography of a runaway slave*. Willimantic: Curbstone Press.

Echevarría, R. 1980. Literature of the Hispanic Caribbean. *Latin American Literary Review* 8(16): 1-20. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20119207> (accessed 19 March, 2010).

Eggers, D. 2007. *What is the what*. New York: Vintage Books.

Eggers, D. 2007. It was just boys walking. *The Guardian*. May 26.

- Feal, R. 1990. Spanish American ethnobiography and the slave narrative tradition: 'Biografía de un Cimarrón' and 'Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú.' *Modern Language Studies* 20 (1) : 100-111. www.jstor.org/stable/3195166 (accessed 19 March, 2010).
- Gugelberger, G. and Kearney, M. 1991. Voices of the voiceless: Testimonial literature in Latin America. *Latin American Perspectives* 18(3): 3-14. www.jstor.org/stable/2633736 (accessed 19 March, 2010).
- Larson, G. n.d. What is the What: Reader's Guide. <http://www.valentinoachakdeng.org/images/WhatistheWhatreadersguide.pdf> (accessed 27 January 2010).
- Luis, W. 1989. The politics of memory and Miguel Barnet's the Autobiography of a Runaway Slave. *MLN* 104(2): 475-491. www.jstor.org/stable/2905149 (accessed 19 March 2010).
- Millay, A. 2005. *Voices from the fuente viva: The effect of orality in twentieth-century Spanish American narrative*. Lewisberg: Bucknell University Press.
- Pascoe, C. 2009. City as Space, City as Place: Proceedings of the Talk about Town: Urban Lives and Oral Sources in 20th Century Australia conference, August 2009. Melbourne: State Library of Victoria.
- Portelli, A. 1997. *The battle of Valle Giulia: Oral history and the art of dialogue*. United States of America: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Portelli, A. 1981. The peculiarities of oral history. *History Workshop*, 12(1), 96-107.
- Portelli, A. 2006. What makes oral history different. In *The oral history reader*, eds. Perks, R. & Thompson, A, 32-41. London: Routledge.
- Thompson, B. 2006. A heartbreaking work of fiction. *The Washington Post*. November 28. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/11/27/AR2006112701573.html> (accessed January 20, 2010).
- Valentino Achek Deng Foundation. 2006. History. <http://www.valentinoachakdeng.org/history.php> (accessed January 17, 2010).
- Valentino Achak Deng Foundation. 2009. Interview with Dave Eggers and Valentino Achak

Deng. <http://www.valentinoachakdeng.org/interview.php>. (accessed 18 January, 2010).