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A Review of Narrative Ethics

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If we use stories as “equipment for living,” as tools to understand, negotiate, and make sense of situations we encounter, then a discussion of narrative ethics is a relevant, if not required, endeavor. In other words, if we learn how to think, feel, and interact with society via narratives, we also learn ethical ways of being with others, “correct” and “appropriate” ways that serve as foundations for many of our interactions. This latter epistemological assumption guides this study. In this article, the author synthesizes ethical themes of life research, themes of narrative privilege, media, and evaluative criteria. He then illustrates how these themes influence narrative inquiry.

Keywords: *narrative inquiry; ethics; life research; autoethnography; narrative privilege*

If we use stories as “equipment for living” (Burke, 1973), as tools to understand, negotiate, and make sense of situations we encounter, then a discussion of narrative ethics is a relevant, if not required, endeavor. In other words, if we learn how to think, feel, and interact with society via narratives, we also learn ethical ways of being with others, “correct” and “appropriate” ways that serve as foundations for many of our interactions. This latter epistemological assumption is the focus of this article.

Numerous scholars have written about narrative ethics. Most of them, however, only elaborate on a few themes. For instance, Butler (1997, 2000, 2005) outlines ways that ethical demands shape and violate storytellers and audiences. Couser (1997), Frank (1995), and Meininger (2005) discuss politics of voice in writing illness tales. Horner (2002) describes how requirements of self-reflexivity, multivocality, and research collaboration affect story creation. Murphy and Dingwall (2001), Zaner (2003, 2004), and Zylinska (2005) encourage us to move away from ethics as a prescriptive

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practice to embracing an inductive and contingent approach toward moral dilemmas. In this article, I synthesize ethical themes of life research and illustrate how these themes influence narrative inquiry.¹

Narrative: A Brief Overview

Bochner (1994) maintains that narratives are “stories people tell about their lives” (p. 30). Kreiswirth (1992) considers narratives “human constructs that operate by certain conventions” (p. 650), and Richardson (1990) positions narrative as both a “mode of reasoning *and* a mode of representation” (p. 118), a way to conceive of and also tell about the world. Narratives help us make sense of life, and in the telling of stories, we abide by storying conventions such as the use of common storylines, linear or chaotic temporal sequences, and writing within/against genres.²

Some scholars view narratives as separate components of our existence, whereas others view narratives as ontological. For instance, Coles (1989) considers stories as tools for managing life, tools that “not only keep us company, but admonish us, point us in new directions, or give us the courage to stay a given course” (p. 159). Richardson (1990) believes that “people make sense of their lives through the stories that are available to them, and they attempt to fit their lives into the available stories” (p. 129). Brody (2002) positions stories as things we “try on” and “wear”: “Narrative allows us to try on future behavior much as we can try on different suits of clothes before buying one of them. The point of the analogy is that clothing which may look ideally suited for us on the rack may look very different when we try it on and look in the mirror” (p. 202). And, as noted earlier, Burke (1973) suggests that stories function as equipment for living, equipment we can use to confront “lived situations, celebrate [our] triumphs and encompass [our] tragedies” (Brummett, 1984, p. 161).

However, Fisher (1984) positions narrative as an inseparable, ontological quality of being. Barthes (1977) reinforces this idea, deeming narrative as something “simply there, like life itself” (p. 79), and Brody (2002), citing Johnson, maintains that “narrative is not just an explanatory device, but is actually constitutive of the way we experience things” (p. 186). Whether or not we live *with* stories or ontologically exist narratively, each perspective provides different ways of understanding story and experience. For instance, if we metaphorically view narratives as tools for living, we can see how/why they fail particular situations. But if we view narratives as constitutive of humanness, we can observe ways that canonical cultural stories make existence possible.³ Although both views of narrative suggest

different ideas about narrative ethics, I focus on ethical questions that stem from conceiving of narratives as epistemological tools.

If narratives provide ways of interacting with society, then these ways remain saturated with ethical qualities. Richardson (1990) contends that “narrativizing, like all intentional behavior . . . is a site of moral responsibility” (p. 131). White (1980) argues, “Where, in any account of reality narrativity is present, we can be sure that morality or a moralizing impulse is present too” (p. 26). Cheney (1989) believes, “If value is implicit in our descriptions of the world and our place in it, then the narratives we construct will embody value and orient us” (p. 132). And Ellos (1998) suggests, “A good story may have a happy or tragic ending, but what makes it good is the way in which the characters and plot interact in meaningful and creative ways” (p. 315). If narratives are tools and if the crafting and sharing of stories involve morals, then a discussion of ethics is a necessary component of narrative inquiry.

Ethics: A Brief Overview

Brody (2002) refers to ethics as “the world of human activities that have important moral content” (p. 177).⁴ Ellos (1994) views ethics as anything involving “a mythic adventure in caring commitment” (p. 65). Kuhse and Singer (1998) maintain that the goal of bioethics “is not the development of, or adherence to, a code or set of precepts, but a better understanding of the issues,” and they argue that bioethics includes “the value of life, what it is to be a person, the significance of being human” (p. 4). Whereas some authors distinguish between *ethics* and *bioethics*, much of the current ethics-related research aligns with Kuhse and Singer’s description of bioethics: an involvement in a caring, compassionate approach toward understanding what it means to be human and what it means to act morally.

Recent debates about ethics embrace inductive and contingent approaches for managing life, and in disciplines such as medicine, abstract and prescriptive ethical principles carry less importance. In other words, situated chaos and uncertainty motivate the formation of ethical premises; the application of already established ideals to situations can do more harm than good. Ellos (1994) observes that the role of “ethicist” assumes that someone can possess an acquired knowledge of ethics, or at least how ethics works: “The very notion of authority in ethics means that there must be some patterns and principles of an unchanging nature which form the framework of the ethical appeal both individually and collectively” (p. 10).

But such a definitive, preoutlined approach for managing human affairs is not always beneficial.

Zylinska (2005) maintains that ethics “does not amount simply to a logical working out of rules that could then be applied to specific cases; rather, it emerges from the lived experience of corporeal, sexuate beings” (p. xii). She calls for a “politics of openness” (p. 36) and, in using Derrida, believes that undecidability should serve as the foundation for ethics, politics, and any type of decision. The “surprise element of any action,” Zylinska writes, “can never—‘perhaps’ even *should* never—be mastered” (p. 48). She encourages us to engage in “permanent vigilance,” an “ethics that calls for judgment *always anew*,” a sensibility that explores “the contingencies involved in specific, historically situated encounters” (p. 59). Ellis (2007) agrees, noting that there are “no definitive rules or universal principles that can tell you precisely what to do in every situation or relationship you may encounter, other than the vague and generic ‘do no harm’” (p. 5).

Parker (1990) reinforces Zylinska’s (2005) and Ellis’s (2007) observations by discerning problems with seeking “moral refuge in a rational set of universal [ethical] principles” (p. 32). He criticizes the nursing industry’s attempt to develop a “theory of nursing ethics” without “listening to what [nurses’] experiences with patients tell us” (p. 34). He also notes how ethical principles serve to “defend one’s own biases,” do not stimulate “creative thinking and moral imagination,” and often become “tyrannical gods to which [nurses] bow down” (p. 36). Parker calls us to embrace ethical uncertainty and to realize that this embrace “does not indicate a failure of rule-and-principle-based reasoning; rather, it is a reminder of its limits” (p. 36).

Caplan (1980) addresses the problems of “engineered ethics,” the often forced application of preformed concepts to moral dilemmas. He identifies why problems arise in the medical industry when “existing moral theories” cannot provide answers to situations. Caplan argues that “no *single* moral theory can lay claim to the mantle of truth” (p. 27) and further notes that “applied [ethics] work can only remain credible if those involved take it upon themselves to constantly inquire into the nature of the questions being asked and the audience being addressed” (p. 29; see Zaner, 2003). Caplan’s sentiment resembles Zaner’s (2004) belief that “*relationships* are the centerpiece for ethics” (p. 84), Ellis’s (2007) call to embrace a “relational ethic,” an ethic where we “act from our hearts and minds,” and Ellos’s (1998) suggestion that ethicists should help individuals’ stories advance not by the “application of some ethical theory or set of moral principles, but rather in [considering] the integral human interplay of rational and emotional relationships” (p. 316).

Working with ethics involves realizing that we do not know how others will respond to and/or interpret our work. It's acknowledging that we can never definitively know who we harm or help with our communicative practices. And ethics involves a simultaneous welcoming and valuing of endless questioning, never knowing whether our decisions are "right" or "wrong." As Andersen (2005) notes, "In ethics . . . we do not have absolute certainly [*sic*], we must consider the individual enmeshed in all the relevant circumstances of life, and we must seek to establish patterns of ethical response that will carry us and our polis forward" (p. 17). But what does ethics look like if we embrace continual change? What questions can we use to probe authors and stories to uncover their accompanying "ethical dimensions"? And if ethical decisions develop from continual states of flux, what types of questions would welcome and accommodate such dynamic movement?

Narrative Ethics

Widdershoven and Smits (1996) suggest that "the point of narrative research is to make explicit the view of the good life, which is embedded in stories" (p. 276). Frank (1995) calls us to live *with* stories rather than just talk *about* them, a call that implies we can learn how to live good lives and manage bad situations if we adhere to the lessons and experiences embedded in narratives. The assumption that narratives can possess elements of the "good life" directly relates to narrative ethics: If stories remain riddled with ideas about how to live well, we must consider who these ideas about living well exclude as well as how authors and audiences affect these ways to live. In other words, if stories teach us how to act, we must critically evaluate these stories to observe hidden and problematic politics. But we must not approach stories with a prescription or typology for analysis; an evaluation of narrative must remain contingent on the stories, authors, and audiences as they interact in ephemeral contexts. Based on my previous discussion, a prescription or typology for evaluating a life text and its accompanying morals contradicts the dynamic qualities of ethics. Every situation is different and a preformed set of principles runs the risk of doing violence to a story and its author (Murphy & Dingwall, 2001; Zylinska, 2005); as Plato (cited in Kierkegaard, 1941) says, "One cannot pass twice through the same stream" (p. 132).

For instance, as an academic, I must learn to navigate the print and publication forum and the (broad) genre of academic writing. This genre is not something I can learn in a few weeks. I also cannot choose to read and

succeed with an “academic writing for dummies” book. I must work to learn the politics of print, the medium upon which most of my career will rest.

With the exception of the daily newspaper and the random magazine, most members of my immediate family do not read. They are literate but do not have any desire to engage with books or write anything beyond the occasional letter. When I intimately write about my family, I know that they will not and cannot respond to me via print. Many of them do not have the resources (i.e., time, money, skill, desire) to engage the print medium. In terms of narrative ethics, I realize that every time I write my story, I escape textual debate with the people I textually implicate. Family members can, of course, respond with lawsuits and legal challenges (hopefully not!), but I am somewhat certain they will not personally write an essay to respond to one I publish.

However, I believe this situation should not silence me when it comes to storying my life. My family members could learn to write if they wanted, but that is not one of their priorities. I present this as an ethical component of life research: We can write about a variety of things and, for the most part, remain fairly certain that intimate others will not respond via text. Furthermore, the text-centeredness of this culture makes possible certain types of knowledge, and if research doesn’t appear in “proper” textual form, it often becomes deemed inferior and invalid (Bell, 1993; Conquergood, 1998, 2002; Jackson, 1993; Jones, 1997; Lorde, 1984; Ong, 1982; Pineau, 1995); as Smith (1999) argues, writing is viewed as the “mark of a superior civilization” (p. 28). Individuals with a fine command of writing facilitate in creating views of life that often remain secluded from (written) debate.

I thus ask: If narrative ethics “accords a central role to stories” and if narrative ethicists assume that “narratives do moral work” (Nelson, 2001, p. 36), who has “narrative privilege,” the ability to tell or listen to a story? What role does a medium play in the creation and presentation of a life? And how might ethical demands influence or silence the telling of a tale?

Who Has Narrative Privilege?

With narrative ethics, we must consider who is able to tell a story and who has the ability to listen. For example, for “legitimized” life writing to occur, an author(s) must say something new about a life situation either by way of countering culturally dominant narratives, adding to hegemonic storylines, disrupting convention(s), and/or developing a new genre. If stories repeat conversations, they are perceived to lack cultural value. Couser (1997) says this best about breast cancer writing: “It is symptomatic of the maturing of the breast cancer narrative that new ones evince the need for a

new angle; once the genre has been established, the experience of cancer is not necessarily sufficient to justify a narrative" (p. 70).

Cultural forces influence what sorts of stories get told, basically "who gets a life" (Couser, 1997, p. 77; see Boylorn, 2006; Bruner, 1986; Meiningner, 2005). This requires us, as authors, to acknowledge, to the best of our abilities, privileges we have when constructing a story such as a fine command of grammar, a familiarity with the (academic) print medium (Medford, 2006; Smith, 1999), finding and filling a gap in the literature (Goodall, 2001), being able to create aesthetically appealing texts (Gingrich-Philbrook, 2005), and having the time, physical energy (Rich, 2001), and financial resources to write (Lorde, 1984). We should also acknowledge cultural factors that make a story possible such as its originality and oppressive systems that, because of their oppressiveness, give us a story to tell. Acknowledgment of narrative privilege motivates us to discern who we might hurt or silence in telling stories as well as whose stories we do not (and may not ever) hear. An ethical life writer is someone who responsibly reflects on these issues, not someone who irresponsibly rambles about life's "difficulties."⁵

For instance, I often write about the strained relationship I have with my father (e.g., Adams, 2006). During the writing process, I try to account for and implicitly acknowledge my narrative privilege: My father does not have a computer and does not have the grammatical and linguistic tools to write academically. I know he cannot personally respond via print and academic publishing outlets. I can thus portray my father any way I choose. Here, ethical (re)presentation becomes crucial: I must understand, as best I can, how I may (re)present him, tempering any demonizing feelings I have while still allowing my story to unfold. My story will change knowing that I have textual control over my father's portrayal, but being aware of this control is necessary when we write about others unable to tell their stories.

I also realize my privilege of living, of being healthy, of having the ability to write. In February 2006, a close friend died unexpectedly. Some of our mutual friends speculated that he committed suicide, an act spurred by his father's negative reaction, 2 days prior, to his "coming out" (i.e., telling his father he was gay). His death articulates much about narrative privilege: I know my friend had a strained relationship with his father, but I can never know how he would story it. I am still able to write my relationship with my father and you can read my story, not his. Although obvious, I have the privilege of life to narrate my life; death hinders an individual's ability to personally represent herself or himself via text (Couser, 1997).

What Role Does a Medium Play in the Creation and (Re)Presentation of a Life?

As Marshall McLuhan's (1964; McLuhan & Fiore, 1967) aphorism goes, "The medium is the message." This aphorism implies that the form in which a message appears is just as important as the message's content (i.e., what is said). The same holds true for narrative: The form of a story affects an author's construction and an audience's interpretation of the story's content. This assumption motivates Booth (1989) to discern an "ethics of technique," a consideration of how the medium in which a life appears influences an audience's experience of this life. We cannot divorce a medium from its content, audience, or authorial requirements.

This idea becomes increasingly complex when we consider narratives *as* mediums—as technologies and epistemic devices that provide us with specific ways of interacting with the world—and *mediated* narratives, stories brought to us via media like books, television, and the Internet. These are both necessary components of narrative inquiry: Whereas narratives are always mediated via orality, performance, writing, and so on, narratives are also media (i.e., ways to (re)present life experience).⁶ Richardson (1990) notes, "*How* we are expected to write affects *what* we can write about" (p. 120), and I would add, "*How* we are expected to present our writing affects *what* we can write about as well."⁷

When considering narrative ethics, we must consider the relationship a medium(s) has with a story and its accompanying morals. For example, to share a story, individuals must use narrative conventions such as proper ways of storytelling, the use of characters, plots, and genres (e.g., tragedy, comedy), a reconstruction of events that makes sense, and a directional movement, whether chronological or discontinuous, such as Frank's (1995) chaos narrative.⁸ A life writer must also situate a story within a language system and its affiliated norms.

Couser (1997) describes how books influence life writing, and he illustrates techniques that authors use to accommodate their lives to this medium. For instance, many sick or differently abled individuals are physically and psychically unable to write about their lives. They must rely on others to tell their stories via print. A written record of a life requires a fair amount of health and energy. It also requires time and adequate resources such as a fine command of language and financial stability. Impending disease and, of course, death serve to limit a sick person's story. And if a person wants to see herself or himself in print, she or he must have the required linguistic, economic, social, and health capabilities (Lorde, 1984; Meininger, 2005; Rich, 2001).⁹

The written medium also allows a text to emerge in a variety of situations, all of which remain outside of the temporal, physical, and psychological environment of its creation. Encountering a life text away from its originating context thus makes it important to discern, to the best of our ability, conditions that made this text possible. And although we can only partially reconstruct these formative conditions, it is the *attempt* to do so that becomes an ethical audiencing practice.

We must also approach personal narratives differently from how we would approach traditional, social scientific research. As Mitch Allen (personal communication, May 4, 2006) suggests, life writing is “a bit riskier” than reading and writing “5-point Likert scales.” Unlike this latter genre, it can be dangerous to disassemble life texts. For instance, I do not think individuals should use the story of my strained relationship with my father as proof that *all* gay men have strained relationships with their fathers, an insidious, heteronormative discourse about homosexuality that has only, within the past few decades, lessened in canonical capital (Adams, 2006). I do not consider it appropriate to take the story of a promiscuous, HIV-positive gay man as proof that gay men are irresponsible, hypersexed individuals or as proof that HIV is only a “gay disease” (Couser, 1997). And it would be unethical to use Berry’s (2007) experiences of a gay bathhouse as proof that bathhouses should close or that gay culture is morally “dirty,” especially because neither of these sentiments has anything to do with the author’s arguments.

We cannot control texts once they become fixed via print, but it is this permanency of the written medium that makes possible the aforementioned ethical concerns. Smith (1999) speaks of this permanency when she characterizes writing as a “dangerous” practice because our texts can be “misappropriated and used against us” (p. 36). Discussions of representational media *are* important when conceiving of narrative ethics. I realize that we take an author’s work out of context every time we cite it, but I call attention to how texts classified as life writings are most vulnerable in such a lifting practice. When we lift a piece of a life constructed on the page from its larger story, we separate it from its written, constitutive conditions. This does not imply that we cannot use or evaluate personal narratives, but I believe that we must use a different sensitivity when working with life texts as compared to working with other forms of research.

How May Ethical Demands Influence or Silence the Telling of a Tale?

Similar to how media affect the construction and (re)presentation of a story, ethical demands asked of an author and her or his text also affect the

construction and presentation of a story. In discerning the “psychic violence” of ethical norms, Butler (2000) argues that in ethics, “there is no innocence, only the *navigations of ambivalence*, since it seems to be impossible to be persecuted without at once being or becoming the persecutor as well” (p. 26, italics added). She encourages us to embrace ambivalence when it comes to talking about ethics and the “oughtness” of life, calling us to acknowledge how prescriptive ethical applications potentially “persecute” an-Other while simultaneously acknowledging ways that this-Other persecutes us with her or his discourse. Butler embraces an “ethics of non-violence” (p. 26), an idea that resembles Zylinska’s (2005) stance of permanent vigilance, a never becoming comfortable with prescriptive ways of being and an attempt to continuously welcome uncertainty.

Butler (1997) also argues that power “acts on” individuals and simultaneously becomes “acted by” them (pp. 14–15). “The psychic operation of [a] norm,” she writes, “offers a more insidious route for regulatory power than explicit coercion, one whose success allows its tacit operation within the social” (p. 21; see Butler, 2005). Ethical norms act on individuals and are en-acted by them in life research. Noting the psychic violence that these norms can have on authors and audiences allows us to observe narrative criteria to which we remain oblivious.

For example, in research that implicates intimate others, we must often receive informed consent to include these others in our writing or justify why we did not (e.g., Adams, 2006; Ellis, 1995, 2004, 2007; Kiesinger, 2002; Wyatt, 2006). Using Butler’s logic, this is just one of many ethical norms of life research that can hamper the crafting of a life. Informed consent makes it increasingly difficult to negotiate life texts because the stories we tell always implicate others (e.g., our parents, guardians, employers, friends, significant others). But what if I write about others in a personal diary, a text designed to only be read by me? What if I keep this diary in an online, public forum? I still intend to use the diary for myself, as the medium of “personal diary” implies, but others now have access to it. Is this where a discussion of ethics and informed consent must surface, that is when others can access our work? When should I seek permission to write about *others* in *my* life writings? Will *I* silence myself worrying about harming *them*? And how might the ethical practice of informed consent function as psychic/ethical violence on my sharing of stories?

The informed consent requirement influences what we can(not) share with others and who we can(not) explicitly include in our texts. The ethics of informed consent requires us to negotiate a set of norms that will alter our ideas about our lives and what we can disclose. And we may harm

ourselves, out of a responsibility to others, by choosing not to share a traumatic experience that could help others (which, I believe, is what research is supposed to do). For instance, if we write about a history of child abuse, we may jeopardize our abusers and ourselves (e.g., our abusers could get arrested or may harm us again). But in having to get consent, we may put ourselves in harm's way or choose to remain silent and thus unable to "heal and get on with life" (Ellis, 2007). The silencing demands of informed consent may jeopardize a desire and necessity to narrate our lives and help others, and as Andersen (2005) maintains, self-censorship is "the most dangerous of all possible types of censorship" (p. 13). My call is not to abolish informed consent nor do I criticize this ethical mandate, but I emphasize how a seemingly neutral practice can affect the construction and sharing of a narrative and the simultaneous constitution of a life.

We should not disregard ethical demands we require of authors and audiences. However, we must reflexively probe ourselves to consider how our expectations of and ethical stances toward a story may alter its crafting and reception (see Berry, 2006; Bochner, 2000, 2001; Ellis, 2000; Gingrich-Philbrook, 2005; Horner, 2002; Medford, 2006). If we agree that ethics involves contingent and not just prescriptive practices, we must value ambivalence and engage in permanent vigilance when analyzing the content, form, conditions, and author(s) of a life. We must approach these components always anew, realizing that our ethical expectations will alter our relationships with personal texts. In the words of Atkinson (2002), we should embrace a "personal, consider-one-life-at-a-time approach" when "interpreting life stories" (p. 136).

Narrative Inquiry and Oral History

Ellis (2007) suggests that "relational ethics" are most relevant to instances of life writing. However, these ethics are typically not acknowledged or enforced by institutional review boards (IRBs). Most IRB requirements apply to research "being done on strangers with whom we have no prior relationships and plan no future interaction" (p. 5). But with life research, the "stranger" assumption no longer applies: We implicate intimate others in our life texts, we share friend and familial bonds with people we discuss, and it is difficult to remain anonymous. Ellis thus positions relational concerns as important as research concerns and believes we must continually renegotiate interpersonal bonds and intimate conversations just as we continually renegotiate research protocol and institutionalized, prescriptive ethical requirements.¹⁰

We can observe instances of Ellis's (2007) relational ethics in the practices of oral historians. An oral history is a "recounting of some experience, usually told to an interviewer, for historical [i.e., archival] purposes" (Stucky, 1995, p. 1; see Atkinson, 2002; Cvetkovich, 2003; Smith, 1999). Oral historians privilege spoken versions of histories and thus alter the logocentric influence often endemic to academic research. It is also important for oral historians to establish and maintain rapport with research participants. As Stucky suggests, oral history projects rest on "mutual respect" and "honest attempts" to develop a "greater awareness of the other person's culture, attitudes, values, and experiences" (p. 7).

Blee (1993) acknowledged this mutual respect and honesty when she interviewed (former) members of the Ku Klux Klan. She writes of being prepared to "hate and fear [her] informants, to find them repellent and, more important, strange" (p. 604). Blee assumed these feelings would hinder interviewer-interviewee rapport, a criterion important for relating to and hearing personal stories of others, but her self-awareness of prejudice helped establish mutual respect with her informants; she acknowledged potential "ethical violence" she could direct at others.

Oral history's emphasis on relationships situates the method within an ethically vigilant vein. Stories and interactions are recorded, relationships favored. Oral historians do not use rigid surveys, maintain strict control over research "findings," or unreflectively "leave the field." The human component of research makes up the research. People are acknowledged and valued, not objectively mined for data.

Oral historians, however, still control others' life stories. But this is where questions of narrative ethics become essential. "Doing oral history," Cvetkovich (2003) writes, "presents an endless array of practical challenges, including not just who to interview and what to ask but . . . where to do the interview and when to turn the tape recorder off" (p. 166). Like life researchers, oral historians should also try to observe ways an individual's story can change based on how it will be represented (Conquergood, 1985; Ong, 1982; Pollock, 2005) and acknowledge issues of narrative privilege (i.e., who has the time, energy, ability, and opportunity to share their stories). Because many of us learn how to speak before we learn how to write, gathering oral histories seems more of a democratizing process in that individuals are not required to strictly adhere to grammar, spelling, or conventions of storytelling to share their experiences, but it is important to acknowledge who can get left out of the oral-sharing process. Speaking and the sharing of a common linguistic system are privileges many of us take for granted. Individuals who cannot speak or who do not share the same

language as an oral historian may require other tools (e.g., translator) for sharing her or his experiences. This can create obstacles for oral historians when deciding who to interview and how these obstacles would influence the interpretation and meaningfulness of a life, but it is considerations such as these we cannot ethically disregard.

Narrative Ethics: Synthesizing Conversation(s)

In response to a women's magazine that deemed poetry a "less 'rigorous' or 'serious' art form" than prose, Lorde (1984) describes the inherent biases and privileges built into media use and evaluation. Poetry is often devalued, she notes, because it is the most "economical" art form, a medium that "requires the least physical labor, the least material" and a form that can be

done between shifts, in the hospital pantry, on the subway, and on scraps of surplus paper. . . . A room of one's own may be a necessity for writing prose, but so are reams of paper, a typewriter, and plenty of time. (p. 116)

Lorde also suggests that poetry has functioned as the "major voice of poor, working class, and Colored women," discursively marginalized populations. And this connection between a medium (poetry) and its users contributes to the medium's devaluation.

Lorde addresses issues of narrative privilege when she considers who has the resources to write in particular ways as well as which (re)presentational forms are valued. In her example, she suggests that middle- to upper class White (wo)men have resources for crafting prose and the power (i.e., social capital) to establish prose as a culturally valued genre. Questions of media apply when prose is evaluated as better than poetry. Questions of ethical violence apply when we evaluate the work and worthiness of a prose or poetry author. In Lorde's experience, poetry remains inferior to prose, and an author's/artist's credibility depends on the medium in which she or he chooses to work. Poetry (and poets) unfortunately becomes a lazy, secondary, and unworthy form when juxtaposed against rigorous and serious prose.

Lorde highlights questions we must ask ourselves as ethical authors writing and sharing lives and as ethical audiences evaluating and responding to narratives. I thus present three interrelated ethical responsibilities of narrative inquiry:

Acknowledgment of narrative privilege: Why is an author able to write a life text? How might an author's identities promote ethical blindness? Is the textual playing field equal? Does an author need help crafting her or his stories? What audiences are able to access an author's work?

Acknowledgment of (narrative) media: Where will a narrative appear? How do storying and genre conventions affect a person's story? Who is (un)able to engage with a particular medium? Who develops a medium's conventions and whose interests do these conventions serve?

Acknowledgment of ethical violence: What do you require of a life writer? What do you require of an audience? How might an author's interpersonal obligations affect her or his work? Are you evaluating a text via deductive or inductive criteria?

Although I do not present these as essential criteria of narrative inquiry, requiring, dismissing, and/or praising an author or audience solely based on her, his, or their (lack of) privilege, (mis)use of convention, and/or (in)ability to live up to ethical demands is elitist and harmful. As audiences and authors, we must take note of and continually renegotiate our requirements and expectations of life texts, especially when these texts are constitutive of lives themselves. And criteria for life research must remain contingent, provisional, and explicitly discussed if we are to have better dialogue about the purposes of narrative inquiry and its affiliated ethical practices.

We can never definitively know how others interpret our work nor can we ever definitively know who we harm and help with our life stories. Narrative ethics thus involves a simultaneous welcoming and valuing of endless questioning without ever knowing if our life writing and reading decisions are right or wrong. This study should not serve as an all-inclusive endeavor or as a prescriptive typology for approaching narrative ethics. In highlighting dynamics of storytelling, -writing, and -listening, interrogating ethical demands we encounter as life researchers, and outlining tenets of narrative privilege, media, and ethical violence, I acknowledge issues that often proceed unacknowledged by life readers and writers.

I value meaningful conversations about life writing. Such meaningfulness is not possible when unspoken rules and tacit requirements shape life texts and their receptions. Although there will always be a plethora of unspoken influences on authoring and audiencing texts, many of which we will never know, the point of this article is to address influences we need not neglect. Implicit criteria influence life research. As ethical narrative writers, we must continually make these criteria explicit.

Notes

1. In this project, I use *narrative* to describe the life writing-related genres of autoethnography, autoperformance, autobiography, personal narrative, memoir, and so on. See Ellis and Bochner (2000) for a more comprehensive list of genres affiliated with life research.

2. Frank (1995) makes a similar argument about narrative conventions: "Storytellers have learned formal structures of narrative, conventional metaphors and imagery, and standards of what is not appropriate to tell" (p. 3). Thus, although stories, especially life stories, may seem natural and spontaneous, they adhere to conventions affiliated with life writing, conventions that affect and make possible their creation and reception (see Bochner, 2002; Bruner, 1986, 1993; Denzin, 1989; Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002).

3. Viewing narratives as ontological frames ethics, agency, and individuality in particular ways. For instance, in the sense of acting "natural" and uninfluenced by others, agency and individuality become impossible: The ways I think, act, and communicate intersubjectively develop and are molded by the cultures in which I find myself immersed (Appiah, 1996; Buber, 1965; Guignon, 2004; Husserl, 1973; Langsdorf, 1997; Schutz, 1967). Agency and individuality become my self-motivation toward a number of options offered in the world, rather than my own unprocessed ways of thinking, acting, and communicating. My being is tangled up in innumerable narrative webs, webs that lack any specific authors (Butler, 1997, 2004a, 2004b, 2005; Heidegger, 1962) and webs I cannot alter easily or on demand. These webs constitutively make my life possible and, as such, direct me toward specific ways of being and simultaneously steer me clear of others (Stivers, 1993). With narrative ethics, it becomes important to view the moral aspects of these constitutive webs such as how I come to represent and/or speak for others (Adams, 2005; Alcoff, 1991), the workings of harmful canonical tales (Tololyan, 1987), and ways we can potentially question seemingly authorless and thus objectified tales (Berger & Luckmann, 1966).

4. Although Brody's (2002) use of "important" positions ethics as something relevant to significant life events, I believe our most mundane interactions are morally saturated; we can never remain ethically neutral (Goffman, 1959).

5. Sharing life's difficulties is another component of narrative privilege: Individuals who have joyous and not-so-traumatic experiences often do not get to tell their stories. As Couser (1997) observes, most personal narratives highlight difficulties of living and not its praiseworthy moments unless, of course, these moments contribute to the telling of a suspenseful story.

6. Mediated, vicarious experiences pose additional ethical considerations. For instance, while watching television, Langsdorf (1994) examines how she "imaginatively replace[d] the camera with [her] own body" and argues that "in televisual experience, some of the coincidences of embodied experience may be present, others may be absent, and others may be mildly or wildly divergent from expectations that develop in the embodied engagement characteristic of everyday life" (p. 103). Fürsich (2002) describes how we can experience other cultures via televised stories, and Shanahan and McComas (1999) claim that televised nature narratives influence our thoughts about and interactions with "the wilderness." Wolff (1999) suggests that televised religious programs can serve as replacements for embodied in-church worship, and Radway (1984) and Fussell (1980) believe we can vicariously experience imaginary or distant spaces through romance and travel novels. If we can vicariously experience other people via such narratives and if stories provide us access to "Other"-spaces, then we must consider these narratives' accompanying morals. I also consider language a medium, but to narrate an event, we must rely on some language system. Thus, in this study, I consider language and narrative inseparable: I do not consider languaged stories twice-removed stories because both media (i.e., language and narrative) rely on and inform each other.

7. As Nelson (2001) maintains, autobiography “isn’t life. It’s a narrative structure that makes sense of a life” (p. 62). Bochner (2002) describes stories as phenomena that “have the effect of giving a determinate ordering to indeterminate and incomplete experiences” (p. 86). Fisher (1984) argues that “the meaning and significance of life in all of its social dimensions require the recognition of its narrative structure” (p. 3), a structure (medium) that alters author-audience interaction. Bochner and Ellis (1995) believe that telling of one’s life is not the same as living it but argue that a person’s story “cannot be completely detached from the experiences out of which it was formed” (p. 210). And whereas Plummer (2001) notes that “the narrative of a life is clearly not *the* life; and it conforms much less to the contours of the life as lived than it does to the conventions and practices of narrative writing” (p. 399) and Meininger (2005) believes “no spoken or written text can fully contain the lived life of others or ourselves” (p. 116), Denzin (1998) suggests, “There is nothing outside of the text; that is, a thing [e.g., a life] is only understood through its representations” (pp. 405–406; see Denzin, 1989). Life texts may not be lives as lived, but lives can only be understood through their textual (re)productions. These (re)productions simultaneously make up lives, too (Bruner, 1986; Gadamer, 1960/2000).

8. Even nonlinear “chaos” stories have a planned, directional, meta-movement that storytellers use to take audiences to some sort of an end. For examples, see Bochner (1997), Didion (2005), Foster (2001), Herrmann (in press), Kiesinger (2002), Pelias (2002), Rambo (2005), and Ronai (1992, 1995, 1996).

9. We can notice how a similar narrative alteration would occur via television: A 30-minute story becomes compromised by the addition of commercials, and because of the medium’s visual nature, a story becomes altered by strategic editing and image use. Furthermore, regular access to a televised outlet does not exist for most members of society and the knowledge required to construct a TV narrative is quite specialized. With media such as television and books and their immersion in a capitalistic system, the necessity to garner a large audience also becomes a priority. If gatekeepers of these media do not consider an individual’s story interesting and marketable, the author must find other venues in which to share her or his tale.

10. Similar to Ellis, Norman Denzin (personal communication, May 5, 2006) believes that most institutional review boards are unequipped to deal with personal narrative. He also values long-term relationships that develop in life research and encourages us to embrace the “oral history exemption” for research because, like oral historians, we are not “doing scientific research, generalizing to a population, randomly selecting subjects, randomly testing hypotheses, or using quantitative measurements.”

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