Oral History and Impostors: What to do?

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The first time I read about an impostor who had fooled an oral historian was Bruce Jackson's "The Perfect Informant," originally published in the Journal of American Folklore in 1990. In this account, Jackson describes how he was slowly taken in by the fantastic tales of a Vietnam veteran—to the point that he was beginning to plan a documentary film. One telephone conversation with a journalist friend planted the first seed of doubt, and other vets quickly confirmed that while Jackson's informant was a great storyteller, he was a fraud who had never set foot in Vietnam. Jackson left it at that and never again talked with this impostor. But such an encounter raises many questions for historians about how to detect fraud and, more importantly, what to do when you think you've been had.

We live in the age of the witness (or the eyewitness). In Germany, where the Zeitzeuge (contemporary witness) of the Second World War and the Holocaust has been made into a television celebrity, fully imbued with incontestable authority over historical truth via the memory of experience, there has been a decades-long debate about the problems of falling into the trap of memory. But this debate too has only

skimmed the historical and ethical questions raised by impostors.

Impostors, of course, are not a new phenomenon. Fraudsters trying to pass off as Holocaust survivors emerged as soon as the war was over. In my own research, I have found several cases of Germans who posed as Jewish survivors in order to gain access to provisions in displaced persons camps and, more importantly, the opportunity to immigrate to the United States at a time when most Germans were still barred from entering the country. Since the 1990s, fake survivors have landed deals with big publishers and movie studios. Their exposure might have brought an end to the story, but the deeper questions this phenomenon raises have not been answered.

One of the most notorious impostors was Enric Marco, who was born in Barcelona in 1921 and fashioned himself as a hero of the resistance against Franco. In his later accounts, he claimed that he had been deported to Nazi Germany and imprisoned in two concentration camps (Flossenbürg and Mauthausen). In the 1970s, he became president of one of Spain's major labour unions, then vice president of a national advocacy group of parents, and finally the president of a national association representing Spanish concentration camp survivors. When he was exposed by historian Benito Bermejo in 2005, everyone was horrified but few of the people who knew him were surprised. Up to here, this story of Holocaust impersonation has played out dozens of times around the world. But then what? What are we supposed to do? And especially: what are we as oral historians supposed to do with or learn from such impostors—if anything?

The Spanish novelist Javier Cercas has now published an exciting “novel without fiction” that tackles many of these questions, in his case those about Enric Marco. *El Impostor* (2014) has so far only been translated into French (*L’imposteur*, 2015) and German (*Der falsche Überlebende*, 2017); I have read the German translation, from which I am here translating into English. The English translation is scheduled for publication in November 2017.

In painstaking detail, Cercas reconstructs the “true” life of Enric Marco, interviewing him over the course of many months, re-tracing his steps around Spain and Germany, interviewing what seems to be hundreds of people who have known Marco, digging through archives, and eventually discovering the bulletproof evidence that shows Marco’s intentional deceit.

What Cercas found was this: Marco was born in an insane asylum, where his mother was incarcerated at the time of his birth. This is also where Marco’s lies begin: he invented a new birthdate that would have a more dramatic fit with the history of modern Spain. In the 1930s, he was a worker and an anarchist, but he was never, as he claimed, a hero challenging authority. During the Second World War, he was in Nazi Germany, but not as a deportee in concentration camps. Instead, like many other Spanish workers, he had volunteered to work in a factory in Germany. There, he was indeed imprisoned, but the charges against him were dropped, he was released, and he was allowed to return home on vacation. He never went back to Germany but, through his cunning, also evaded being drafted into the Spanish army.

After his return from Germany, he lived a normal life, but in the mid-1950s he abandoned his wife and

daughter, moved to a different city, changed his profession, changed his last name, and remarried. He began to embellish his story of anti-Franco resistance because it gave him the attention and love he never got as a child. Two decades later, as the Franco dictatorship neared its end and everyone in Spain was looking for a new life story, he changed his life again: a new wife, more dramatization of his story, now with short stories about his deportation to Nazi concentration camps and various stories about openly defying SS guards. With the memory boom in Spain in the 1990s—when Spanish society called upon eyewitnesses to look more closely at the events of the 1930s and 1940s—he further dramatized and embellished his story, eventually becoming a regular speaker, giving testimony about his life in the resistance and especially his survival of concentration camps. He spoke to anyone who would listen: from school classes to the Spanish parliament. By around 2000, he had become Spain's "rock star of historical memory."

All of this is fascinating to read. Although Cercas's style is repetitive, circuitous, and wordy—it is always engaging and lively and never boring or confusing. It reads like a casual conversation that interweaves a detective story, a history, and philosophical discourse. In the end, Cercas concludes that Marco lived an ordinary life like millions of other Spaniards—but told the life of an extraordinary hero; and then he lived this life of the hero. And this is where the real questions begin, and where they began for Cercas.

Should he write the book, Cercas asked himself for several years before he finally decided to do so. Throughout writing it, he returned to some of his closest friends' verdict: the impostor Marco had besmirched the memory of Holocaust survivors and

should be punished by being forgotten—not rewarded by having yet more attention heaped upon him through the publication of a book by a well-known novelist. On the other hand: did he, Cercas, even have the right to stir around in Marco's and his family's life? Would he damage them even further? And would he, along the way, embarrass a whole lot of people who had been more naïve and credulous than they would like to admit?

Cercas had even deeper doubts. He was not afraid to find the truth about Marco, but about himself. Once he decided to write the book, Cercas had to figure out what kind of book he was going to write; he calls *El Impostor* a "novel without fiction," and perhaps this aptly describes Cercas's study of the line between what it is real and true and what is half-true, embellished, invented, and false. I think it is fair to simply describe the book as a deeply thoughtful and reflective research report. And yet, of course, it is more. It is a discourse about truth, morality, history, and self-discovery.

Along the way of thinking about Marco and writing this report, Cercas confronts us with many thorny statements and provocative questions. Here are just a few that I found particularly pertinent for oral historians:

From the beginning, Cercas asked himself: What were his needs as an author, and what were his needs as a human being? Could he save himself—as he writes somewhat melodramatically—as both an author and a human being by writing this book? Would writing the book be the morally right thing to do? Oral historians have been struggling with the question of finding a balance between academic integrity and historical truth on the one hand side,

and, on the other hand side, the needs and wishes of the people and communities they work with. Cercas pushes this question to the extreme of life or death: “Reality kills you, only fiction saves you” is the refrain of this book.

“Is it morally permissible to lie?” Cercas asks at one point, and seeks answers from Plato, Voltaire, Montaigne, Kant, and Nietzsche. But for Cercas, this is not only a moral question. It is a starting-point to understand how impostors’ big lies actually work—and how they become unraveled. It is an attempt to understand impostors and their motivations. For Marco, Cercas writes, “reality, not the lying, was unbearable.” Cercas feels similarly: “Reality kills you, only fiction saves you.” This is an extreme view in the case of an impostor (and perhaps in the case of a novelist), but it is true for all of us. New findings in psychology over the past two decades have demonstrated that we continuously confabulate when we actually believe we are telling the truth. (An excellent point of entry into that discussion is Kathryn Schulz’s On Being Wrong.)

Cercas views history and memory as distinct, even oppositional: “Memory is individual, partial, and subjective, history, however, is collective, geared toward the whole, and objective. Yet, memory and history also complement each other; history gives meaning to memory, memory is a tool for and part of history. But memory is not history.” He sides here with Collingwood and Nora, rather than Dilthey and Hutton; the latter two, according to Geoffrey Cubitt, view history and memory as variants of each other. Cercas’s stark contrast between history and memory is a reaction to the recent rise of what he calls the “memory and remembrance industry” and the “sacralization” of the witness.

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Indeed, he has important thoughts about the latter. Cercas is not only interested in personal and individual dilemmas. He assails the larger culture of commemoration that enables impostors like Marco. Almost everyone believed Marco for a long time because his account used “two prestigious and unassailable institutions: that of the victim and that of the witness—no one dares to doubt the authority of the victim; no one dares to doubt the authority of the witness.” I wish Cercas had provided more information about the “commemoration industry” that, he writes, boomed in Spain in the 1990s and 2000s, because it is such a powerful explanation for the

global rise of impostors in the 1990s. Indeed, as an oral historian I am particularly fascinated by it, because oral history is part of this industry.

More broadly to consider for oral historians then is this: In which specific historical, social, cultural, and economic context do we design our research project, perceive potential participants, and conceive of their roles as “witness,” “victim,” “agent,” “informant,” etc.? In other words, what do these social roles imply, to what degree have they become “institutions” that defy historical skepticism? I have written elsewhere about the culture of confession and the storytelling industry as the broader context in which oral history is practiced in North America in the early twenty-first century.

Cercas’s book is an important contribution to this larger question. It would be a fascinating read even if Marco had been unique. But by focusing on what drove and enabled Marco, Cercas illuminates a much broader social phenomenon, namely our current society’s need and desire for memory, authenticity, and story—even at the cost of truth. Cercas thus provides insight into a modern identity crisis that affects not just Marco and even Cercas himself, but Western society at large. The take away for oral historians is that *El Impostor* challenges us to think

even more deeply about our narrators', our own, and especially our society's need for fiction and story in an age that appears to privilege veracity, authenticity, and truth, but that now prefers to trust the authority of memory rather than the "science" of history.