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DAVE EGGERS



photo courtesy of McSweeney's

MIMI LOK

an interview with
DAVE EGGERS AND MIMI LOK

Conducted by Sean Bex and Stef Craps

On March 18, 2015, we had the rare opportunity to interview the celebrated American author Dave Eggers and Mimi Lok, co-founder with Eggers of Voice of Witness, a socially engaged oral history nonprofit, in front of a student audience at the Vooruit cultural center in Ghent, Belgium. The occasion for their visit was Eggers's being awarded the 2015 Amnesty International Chair at Ghent University in recognition of his human rights work. The interview aimed to give the audience an overall sense of the various creative and charitable projects in which Eggers and Lok are involved and which have earned them widespread acclaim. The published version of it that appears below is an edited and condensed transcript.

Eggers burst upon the literary scene in 2000 with his memoir *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, which recounts the tragic loss of his parents to cancer and his subsequent struggle to find his way in life with his younger brother Christopher. He followed up this success with *You Shall Know Our Velocity* (2002), a novel in which two young Americans seek to overcome personal tragedy by traveling around the world and, along the way, distributing money to those in need. The novel poignantly balances descriptions of abject poverty with ludicrous schemes devised by the protagonists to donate money to the poor.

In *What Is the What* (2006) and *Zeitoun* (2009), Eggers collaborated with victims of human rights abuses in Sudan and the U.S., respectively, in order to give a voice to their suffering. The former tells the story of one of the so-called Lost Boys of Sudan, Valentino Achak

Deng, as he struggles to survive the second Sudanese civil war and suffers from culture shock, indifference, and racism after being resettled in the U.S. *Zeitoun* focuses on domestic issues in the U.S. as it chronicles the experiences of a Syrian-born New Orleans resident and Hurricane Katrina hero who is arrested and detained without charge on suspicion of terrorism.

Eggers's other works include *How We Are Hungry* (2004), a collection of short stories, and *A Hologram for the King* (2012), an allegorical novel about the decline of America. The novel features a down-on-his-luck American businessman who tries in vain to sell a holographic communications system to the king of Saudi Arabia in a last-ditch effort at turning his own life around. Eggers's most famous fictional work is arguably *The Circle* (2013), a cautionary tale about the erosion of privacy in the digital age. It portrays a powerful tech company whose ultimate goal is to make everything known and transparent, at any cost. These are just a few of Eggers's literary works; there are many more, including several novels as well as children's books and screenplays.

Apart from being a writer, Eggers is also an editor, publisher, graphic designer, activist, and philanthropist. In 1998 he founded the independent publishing house McSweeney's. Based in San Francisco, McSweeney's publishes books, an influential literary journal (*Timothy McSweeney's Quarterly Concern*), a bimonthly magazine (*The Believer*), and the Voice of Witness book series, which depicts human rights crises around the world through the stories of the men and women who experience them. Voice of Witness has produced volumes on Sudan, Burma, Zimbabwe, Colombia, and the United States, as well as, most recently, a volume on Palestinians living under Israeli occupation. Eggers is also a passionate literacy advocate. In 2002 he co-founded 826 Valencia, a nonprofit writing and tutoring center for children and teenagers which has since opened chapters in six other cities across the U.S. He tells the story about 826's inspiration, early beginnings, and ensuing momentum in a deservedly popular TED talk. Another, more recent charitable project is ScholarMatch, a nonprofit organization that connects donors with prospective college students who need help paying their high tuition fees. Two further charities that should be mentioned are the Valentino Achak Deng Foundation and the Zeitoun Foundation,

which Eggers founded with the protagonists of *What Is the What* and *Zeitoun* and to which he has donated all royalties from these best-selling books. The Valentino Achak Deng Foundation built and operates a school in Deng's home village in South Sudan, while the Zeitoun Foundation funded reconstruction projects in New Orleans and promoted interfaith understanding.

The interview below consists of two parts. The first part deals with Eggers's literary work, homing in on *The Circle* in particular, while the second part focuses on *Voice of Witness*. For this part of the conversation we were joined by Lok, who has served as the book series' executive director and executive editor since 2008. Before that, she worked as a freelance reporter for the Asia bureau of *The Washington Post*, the *Chicago Sun-Times*, and *USA Today* and taught creative writing at San Francisco State University and in schools in Hong Kong and China. What Eggers and Lok clearly share is a passion for human rights storytelling. We kicked off the interview, though, with a few questions about Eggers's identity as a writer, his writing process, and the evolution of his literary work.

Q. Do you consider yourself a writer first and foremost? Is that the core of your professional identity, from which everything else flows, or do you see writing as on a par with your work as an editor, publisher, and activist?

A. When we started up McSweeney's in San Francisco and 826 Valencia, I can honestly say that that year I probably did not write a whole lot. Overall, though, it changes month to month. Sometimes I have a project that I want to dedicate time to, and I have to set aside writing for a while, but as I've gotten older, all of these foundations that we have started have matured. They are all in good hands, and so they do not need my help on a day-to-day management basis. As a result, I've been able to return to more full-time writing. When I enter a country and they ask me what my occupation is, I write "writer." However, this feels strange, because I think it's a ridiculous luxury to be able to write for a living. I feel it's always very pretentious to say that; I've never quite gotten used to it. It's something that I feel very grateful for every day. I don't take it for granted: I feel like I'm still earning it every day, largely because my parents really worked for a living. My mother was a

teacher, and my father worked hard as a lawyer. They had regular nine-to-five jobs that were hard, and I have the ability to choose my hours and wake up late if I want to. But because I feel so grateful or lucky, I tend to keep the same regular office hours these days. I don't always have a chance to write those eight hours, but at least I'm in the writing position. I feel so lucky that I have to put in the time, at least. Otherwise I have this crushing sense of shame that comes from my Catholic upbringing, which says, "Hey, what are you doing? You've been given this chance; other people really have to work for a living, so get back to work!" So I do feel an obligation to work as hard as the people, like my parents, who were not always doing something day to day that they loved. My mother loved teaching, but my father did not always get to take on cases that he loved. I think any of us who have the ability to do something we love tend to work twice as hard, to compensate for the luck that we have had.

Q. How do you usually begin a book? Do you start with a character, a plot, a setting, or an issue that you want to explore? Could you perhaps walk us through your writing process?

A. I usually write one scene and one chapter first where I lock in the tone, the style, and the characters. It has to be something that you are interested in, that comes naturally, and that you feel passionate about. You can build the rest of the work around it once you've solved that case on the micro-level.

For *The Circle*, I'd been thinking about this issue for around ten years because I've been in Northern California for twenty-two years and I saw the rise of the Internet. I remember the first collapse of the dot-com bubble as well as its subsequent boom. Many of my friends are now in positions of power in some of these companies, while others have start-ups or develop apps, websites, and so on. I've been immersed in it for so long. I had been trying to synthesize ideas about it, about what exactly I find concerning about it. A lot of times I will take notes for years and years on something that might not come to fruition. But in this case I had two or three feet of notes, just stacks of paper, and I didn't know what to do with them until I had the idea of Mae, the protagonist, starting on her first day at one of the companies—the idea that somebody is given

this great opportunity, leaving a terrible job to come to a utopia, a dream job, and that this slowly devolves so that the more nefarious aspects of this company would become clear as the novel went along.

The first scene I wrote for *The Circle* was the one about the Portugal lunch. I thought I'd write this scene, and then the rest of the book would build out from that. Mae is fairly new at this company, and she is in trouble because somebody sent her an e-mail informing her that there was a lunch for people interested in Portugal and she didn't attend the lunch. The scene scared me because it was something that has happened in my life, too. You get thousands of e-mail notices, and you cannot respond to all of them. You get this constant feeling that people around you are offended by your silence or your indifference to their invitations or their asking you to like or dislike something. There is an overwhelming deluge of stimuli that we are supposed to respond to.

Q. Do you start at the beginning and write until you reach the end, or do you skip around, writing scenes as you see fit and filling in the gaps later?

A. I'm definitely an obsessive rewriter. I went to journalism school, so I was taught by old Chicago newspaper men. It's like going through boot camp for journalism, where they beat you down, tell you that you are terrible. You have to strip down your style. Any adjective that you cannot absolutely justify gets thrown away. It's constant revising and revising, and then after ten revisions you're lucky to get a C. That's the best grade we could get in school. It teaches humility, and it taught me, having worked with newspapers and journals for so long, that the revision process is endless. I learned that I could always learn something from an editor's input, and that I needed to vet my writing thoroughly myself and through other readers. So I would say that on average I do twenty drafts of anything I publish, even today. I also usually send it to at least fifteen different readers to get their notes before I feel comfortable.

This is also how we teach students at 826 Valencia. Of course, when I was in high school, I never revised anything. I would finish the draft the morning it was due and then turn it in, cross my fingers, and think that one draft was enough. The incredible hubris to

think that your first draft is your best draft! So when we work with students who are reluctant writers, or who do not have a lot of one-on-one help that they can get, we teach them to revise. On the walls of 826 Valencia we have all these proofs and drafts. For example, we have Amy Tan's book *The Bonesetter's Daughter*, which is really popular in San Francisco. We have the twenty-eighth draft of that book on the wall, to show students that even Amy Tan—a professional writer who has written a dozen novels—is still revising and that she can still benefit from that. If you are humble about your writing and do not presume that any type of sentence is perfection, it actually opens up the process and makes it much more approachable and egalitarian. We can all reach a certain level of proficiency if we work at it.

I think being humble about it is key. You need to know that everything you do now is practice. You are not writing the best work that you will ever write at age eighteen or twenty. I don't think I wrote anything that I was proud of until I was thirty—or maybe twenty-eight. I think novelists get infinitely better into their thirties and forties, so it's a long game. You should not take yourself too seriously, even though you are serious about the work you are doing, of course. I was encouraged as a young writer to just submit to as many magazines as possible. Anything that you get published gets you to be part of a new community. You should not be precious about it. New readers and editors mean you get help with your work, causing it to advance. You get the benefit of reader response as well as the feeling of having your work out there. It really is a slow process of climbing a pyramid, where you are trying to get better.

Q. As is the case with *The Circle's* Mae Holland, your protagonists tend to be hopeful and idealistic, bordering on naive at times. They seem to be almost willfully blind to the evil that surrounds them. Would you agree with this characterization of the "Eggersian hero," so to speak?

A. I would not necessarily agree that there is any overarching trait. You will see connections in all of this that I will not necessarily see or endorse, but I understand that I'm not always the best expert. I'm not always the most knowledgeable at seeing connections

between novels that I wrote fifteen years ago. You probably know them better than I do at this point. I never go back and reread some book I wrote thirteen years ago, because it's horrifying. You see all these mistakes, things you should have done differently. Eventually you simply have to let it go. You have to learn to see each book as a document of its time, a document of your mind, a place in your life, or a point you wanted to make in 2002 that you wouldn't necessarily make at all or in the same way now.

But I'll talk about the character Mae. I thought it was really important that Mae come from a point of relative disadvantage. She comes from what we call the Central Valley, which is ninety miles from San Francisco—lower middle class, a lot of farming, pickup trucks, not a whole lot of money. She feels like she has been given this incredible gift to work at The Circle. As a result, she is inclined to discount any hints that something is awry. So yes, I would say she is willfully blind. That's exactly what it is, and you find this again and again. Until recently, when Obama passed his health care act, anyone, any young person who could get a good health insurance plan was so grateful to their company. That's because it's rare, and if you don't have insurance, you're in trouble in the U.S. Mae has a sick parent, she came from nowhere, and she feels like she's been given this gift. She has to be naive, willfully naive, because even when there are little signs of trouble, she doesn't feel like she has a right to blow the whistle. She feels that no matter how bad it gets, it's never worse than where she came from, which makes it something of a perfect storm for turning or radicalizing someone.

Q. For a time, your books reflected a gradually broadening scope as far as subject matter is concerned. While *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* dealt with personal family traumas, the books that followed it were set all around the world or featured non-American-born protagonists and addressed global problems and concerns. However, your two most recent novels, *The Circle* and *Your Fathers, Where Are They? And the Prophets, Do They Live Forever?* [2014], are set entirely in the U.S., have American-born protagonists, and are primarily concerned with the American context, even if the issues they explore resonate beyond national boundaries. Was this re-focusing on the U.S. prompted by anything in particular?

A. I think *The Circle* is—intends to be—a globally minded book, in the sense that the concerns it addresses profoundly affect everyone's life, across the globe, even though these companies are generally based in California. *Your Fathers* is definitely an American book, though. It takes place there, and it's very locally rooted. Ideally, though, there are universal things in all of my books, even though some are about someone coming to the U.S. and adjusting to life there, like *Valentino*, and some are about an American going abroad. The American character in *A Hologram for the King*, for example, goes to Saudi Arabia, and the entire book is set in Jeda. What I resist, and what I'm really not good at, is writing a book that takes place in one neighborhood or a single community. I wrote about my upbringing in Chicago in *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, and I felt like everything I could possibly say about the suburbs was said in that book. Now, when I take on a book, I want to be able to learn something. For example, *You Shall Know Our Velocity* was set in Senegal, Morocco, Latvia, Estonia, et cetera, giving me an opportunity to visit all these places, too. As a journalist, with that training, you always want an excuse to go somewhere and have a reason to see something new, or learn something new, or interview people. All of my work has that in common. Other than that, I can't say that there is a master plan. The truth is I never know what is going to strike me next. Take *Your Fathers*, for example: the fact that this book is all dialogue came out of nowhere. I actually wrote it before *The Circle* and put it aside because I thought it was too strange. Once I finished *The Circle*, I came back and read it again and found that it still resonated with me. I do have things that I've been taking notes on for years and that I'm trying to shape, but I have no idea what will emerge or crystallize next.

Q. Let's dig down a little into *The Circle*, which has been highly successful. Would it be fair to say that Mae Holland is not just a specific character but also something of an Everyman figure?

A. Yes! There is not an incredible amount of background on Mae, so you could say that I tried to make her—not to say an empty vessel, but a pair of eyes that did not view things with too much baggage or skepticism. I think she is fundamentally optimistic and wants to believe in the advantages and ideals of *The Circle* as well

as the campus at its center. There are two ways to see a campus like that. The founders and the staff of so many of these companies do so many things well; they take on a very active role in improving every part of the system, meaning that they aim to provide the best possible service to their employees in terms of food, exercise, relaxation, and accommodation. There are hundreds of campuses all around California that provide these kinds of things. But what is the trade-off? This is what I'm trying to get at in *The Circle*. What is the trade-off when everything is filtered through or being decided on by one central organization? The Circle would prefer that you interact only with other Circlers and that you stay on campus as much as possible. It can take a turn toward total control, and Mae is subject to the fact that The Circle knows all of her movements all of the time. I keep hearing from actual employees in these companies saying, "It's like you were in the room with us; this is exactly my life!" Not necessarily the evil side of it, but the day-to-day things. And this was the nicest person you will ever meet, which means that all of these companies are full of good, idealistic, bright people. These people struggle with the things that they need to be questioning or do not quite approve of. That's why I keep believing that everyone would welcome a conversation about ethics and boundaries. All of the people who work in these companies sometimes do stuff that goes beyond what they would approve of.

Q. *The Circle* is a satire on social networking and surveillance culture. It's a cautionary tale about threats to privacy, freedom, and democracy. I wonder, though, if you personally have any sympathy at all for the arguments of the company philosopher, Bailey, who sings the praises of radical transparency and total knowledge. He claims that we are at the dawn of a second Enlightenment, and that absolute transparency will make human beings more moral. Does he have a point? Or are you completely on the side of Mae's ex-boyfriend Mercer and her lover Kalden, the two voices of opposition in the novel? They are convinced that The Circle is, or has become, utterly sinister, and that we are headed straight for a totalitarian nightmare. Where do you stand yourself?

A. I'm very clearly a skeptic about a lot of these things. I think this has to do with the fact that I grew up before the Internet revolution.

I saw it rise, saw it come up all around me, and so saw it go from a pure, utopian idea to what it is now. I've talked to so many people who were there at the beginning of the Internet and have read *The Circle*, and they say that they are horrified by some of the same things that I wanted to create horror about in the novel. That is, the conglomeration of power and wealth into a very few hands and the temptation toward submitting to this central funnel of all information where, in exchange for having all of your banking, your voting, and your social life in one place, you give up access to some third party, some capitalist company that uses it for means beyond your control and knowledge. That is where we are at right now. In exchange for "freedom," in exchange for "free things," we allow ourselves to be spied on. As such, I think the rise of the Internet has turned out radically different from how the idealists originally thought it would; they imagined a much more egalitarian, democratic system, where the power was equally spread. No one predicted that it would end in an unprecedented concentration of power and wealth.

Q. In your novel, the culprit is a private company, and the government is cast as a potential savior, in principle if clearly not in practice. I wonder if you have reconsidered that position in light of the recent leak of classified NSA documents by Edward Snowden, which revealed the sweeping extent of the U.S. government's surveillance and espionage activities. I believe your novel was released shortly after the first Snowden revelations. In a way, what these revelations suggest is that the completion of the circle, the attainment of absolute omniscience which is the company's ultimate goal, is already upon us, and that not only has it come even sooner than you expected but it's the government itself, rather than big business, that has pulled it off.

A. The Snowden issue was unfolding when I was finishing the book. The really weird twist was that I finished the book in Ecuador—sometimes I go far away from everything to get work done—and I landed in Guayaquil the same day that Edward Snowden was meant to land there. This was before he went to Russia, when he was granted asylum by the Ecuadorian government. I was at the airport, and there were a great number of people looking for

Edward Snowden. Then I went off to finish this book about some of the issues that had prompted this situation. It was an extraordinarily strange confluence of events.

I'm a massive critic of the NSA; I've come out on record many times to criticize their activities. I quite frankly think the NSA is completely out of control. It answers to no one, it seems; there is no transparency about what they do; it's not being regulated. I believe that all these Internet companies do need to be regulated by the U.S. government in the U.S., and there should be some sort of global response, too—some form of regulation by the UN that sets up a global framework that all of these companies would be required to operate under. We don't have a set of standards; we don't have a set of ethical guidelines.

Q. A digital Bill of Rights, as proposed by the character Kalden in *The Circle*?

A. Yes, a UN declaration of digital rights with legal consequences. Think of Google, which is continually sued in European courts, especially in Germany, for violations of privacy. I think those lawsuits put a check on the power. Again, though, there is no framework that everyone operates under. I think that some of these companies would be reluctant to be outliers or outlaws in such a framework if it were created. They would try to operate within it to some extent. Any other industry—law, biology, medicine, food—has some form of global agreement about what is ethical, but there is no such thing when it comes to the digital world, and therefore that has to be the first step. We would hope that the NSA would be subject to that agreement, but the gathering of intelligence in the U.S. has always happened to a large extent outside of all law.

Q. *The Circle* is often compared to George Orwell's classic dystopian novel *Nineteen-Eighty-Four*. There are some unmistakable parallels between the two, not least the adaptation of Orwell's slogans "War Is Peace," "Freedom Is Slavery," and "Ignorance Is Strength" to "Secrets Are Lies," "Sharing Is Caring," and "Privacy Is Theft." Could you talk about the nature and extent of Orwell's influence on you?

A. First of all, I think that any time you write a dystopian book, it's bound to be compared to *Nineteen-Eighty-Four*. People compare *The Hunger Games* to *Nineteen-Eighty-Four*, for example. I think it's something of a go-to corollary. That said, Orwell has been one of my favorite writers, his journalism as much as his fiction. When I started this novel, I made a point of not reading *Nineteen-Eighty-Four* again, of not reading *Brave New World* again. I deliberately steered clear of anything that might unintentionally trickle into me. However, once I had finished *The Circle*, I went back to Orwell's novel to make sure that I had not inadvertently borrowed from it. The only thing I did consciously was that nod to those three slogans: that was very much on purpose. Orwell's work reads just as freshly today as when it was written. One of the things I noticed was that on page 1 of *Nineteen-Eighty-Four*, life is miserable. The apocalypse has already happened; everyone is subject to an all-powerful totalitarian regime; they have no rights or opportunities. The narrative is a matter of Winston Smith struggling within the narrow confines of that world, trying to break out, maybe having a chance at love, and then failing at that. I really wanted to have a much slower burn, where you slowly get to participate in the descent. I think that there are not a tremendous number of similarities in practice, outside of both being dystopian books. The other thing is that in *Nineteen-Eighty-Four* you have submission to a totalitarian regime that you cannot resist or they will torture or kill you. I wanted *The Circle* to be pointedly such that everyone is participating, doing it willingly. Think of the younger engineers and developers who are pitching ideas to the powers that be at The Circle. All of their ideas take things so much further and make it so much worse than it already is. That's where it's going, and it's so hard to roll it back at this stage.

Q. *The Circle* reminded me in some ways of Gary Shteyngart's novel *Super Sad True Love Story*. Like you, Shteyngart conjured a dystopian vision of a near-future America characterized by pervasive surveillance and constant social networking. He has expressed his shock at the fact that many of the parodic, extreme predictions he made in *Super Sad True Love Story* back in 2010 have already come true. I wonder if that is also your experience with *The Circle*, in

which you describe numerous new services and technologies that are being invented at this company. Weren't you at all worried about inadvertently giving the Mark Zuckerbergs of this world ideas?

A. No, I think they've thought of everything. Honestly, nothing that came up had not already been thought up by someone in research and development. Some of it has even already happened. It's moving so fast, and there is so much money in it. These companies have so many billions of dollars for research and development that any notion that they have is looked into and potentially turned into reality. Google and Apple are both developing driverless cars. The U.S. automobile industry is scared to death. They are not just developing the technology to drive the car, but the car itself. Apple has more cash than any company has ever had in the history of the world and can buy any company in any sector and make things. So again, I cannot imagine that something I thought of has not yet been thought of by some of these companies. You know, Google has this internal Project X, where all the new ideas are developed; all the campuses have secret research and development sites where they come up with whatever is going to happen next.

Q. Let's move on to talk about Voice of Witness. Ms. Lok, thanks for joining us. Could you start us off by explaining briefly the general idea behind Voice of Witness?

A. [Lok] Voice of Witness is a nonprofit book series as well as an education program. The main idea is that we want to change the way people think about human rights crises. By that we mean that we want to engender a more nuanced, a more layered, a more empathy-based understanding and engagement with these issues, so that people become better informed and empathetic global citizens and more effective advocates for human rights and human dignity. The book series has covered a wide range of issues. We have interviewed wrongfully convicted Americans, people affected by Hurricane Katrina, undocumented workers in the U.S., and people in women's prisons. Internationally, we have interviewed people who escaped repressive regimes in places like Burma, Sudan, Zimbabwe, and Colombia. In addition to these collections of oral histories, we have

produced a methodology book that comes out of our education program, *The Power of the Story: The Voice of Witness Teacher's Guide to Oral History* [2015]. It sets out how teachers can use the stories in the classroom but also describes a methodology for anyone who wants to do an oral history project.

Q. Could you tell us about the process of making a Voice of Witness book? How does it start, and how does it all come together?

A. [Lok] It's quite an involved process. It normally starts with a conversation, someone with an idea for a collection. The criteria are straightforward: it has to be a contemporary human rights crisis, and it has to be underreported. We also want to know that the person who is proposing this project is not only qualified to undertake it—has a good track record in the field and experience with the communities where the interviews will take place—but also is not just interested in proving a specific hypothesis. They need to want to learn something and be genuinely curious. Once this has been established, we ask them to develop a proposal of around five pages, containing a budget, a timeline, and—most importantly—what their vision is for the project. I am usually the person who will help to refine the proposal by anticipating the questions the rest of the Voice of Witness team will have as we look at it and decide on whether or not to accept it. Generally, we want to stick to projects that we think will add something of value to the series. We want to keep the topics as fresh and diverse as possible. But there are certain things that we return to, like the justice system in the U.S., in *Surviving Justice* [2005], *Inside This Place, Not of It* [2011], and one other potential volume looking at solitary confinement. Someday we hope to do a book on the juvenile justice system. We have an extremely long list of topics we would like to address, but it's really about getting the right proposals from the right people at the right time.

Q. A question for Mr. Eggers in particular, as it follows on from something you mention in your introduction to *The Voice of Witness Reader* [2015]. You write about a Sudanese woman who had lost faith in media reporters coming to interview her, to cover her story, because she never heard from them again afterward. Is that some-

thing you often find, that fear that there won't be any follow-through and a reluctance, therefore, to share one's story?

A. [Eggers] I think a lot of people who've had their human rights compromised and then have had experience with the media are skeptical. They may feel as if somebody sticks a microphone in their face and gets a few quotes and leaves. Afterward, they're left worse off than they were before. It's a form of retraumatization. For example, you have the wrongfully convicted in America: they've had their names plastered all over headlines saying that they're convicted murderers. They sometimes have to wait eighteen to twenty years in prison to clear their names. Those people have had their narratives taken from them, their identities reshaped or misshaped. They are very skeptical, so we have to let them know from day one that we will give them control over the process. We explain that nothing will be published without their approval and that we want to get it right. Then we record their stories over the course of hours, days, and sometimes months or even years. Afterward, we order their story into a chronology, and we check with them, as well as conducting fact-checks at our end, in order to make sure that it is beyond debate whether it is the truth—the truth, that is, about the lives that they have lived. This process allows them to reclaim their narrative, in a way. I think that knowing that they're going to have control, that they can pull the plug at any time, gives them a sense of security. It means that they don't have to risk having another mistruth printed about them.

We do not interview people who we feel are at risk of retraumatization. Generally, with the books, we work with agencies that know people they have worked with who are comfortable talking. We don't necessarily go somewhere and find somebody who has no record of speaking at all. Usually, it's a very gentle, careful process of vetting before we even begin an interview.

Q. How do the interviewers experience the process of collecting oral histories? How are they affected by listening to these testimonies?

A. [Eggers] It varies. When you train as a journalist, you get used to having a defensive shield about these things. You need to put on

a brave face and keep the tape recorder running while you keep asking questions. What was interesting when Valentino and I were in South Sudan, interviewing a woman who had been enslaved for sixteen years, was that she was very straightforward and could just tell her story. She was angry, and she wanted the world to hear. Valentino had to stop the tape a few times, however, because her story was overwhelming him. You never know how it will affect you. But we do allow our interviewers to be empathetic. They can stop the tape, touch somebody's arm; they can be human. People are both listening as humans and have a tape recorder running. These two things happen concurrently. I'm not going to deny one or the other. It can be incredibly overwhelming for the interviewers; we hear that a lot. For example, when an interviewer in the U.S. cannot believe that something is happening on our own soil.

A. [Lok] We also realized the need to support our interviewers from the very start. There is a tendency for interviewers to think that even if they have a hard time dealing with what they are hearing, it doesn't compare to what the other person has been through, and it therefore doesn't matter. It does, though, because if you do not practice self-care, you cannot continue doing this job. We have guidelines that prioritize the needs of the person being interviewed but also acknowledge the interviewer's needs. We build the interview, in the sense that we do not go directly to the trauma. We will start off gently, talk about how your day is, what you are up to, how you are feeling, then talk about the trauma. This allows us to avoid unearthing the trauma and then just walking away, which would be jarring for the narrator and for the interviewer. Recently I've been having conversations with a clinical psychologist who has experience with vicarious trauma and compassion fatigue, which is something that human rights activists are often vulnerable to, even if it gets played down. You really do have to be strong and take care of yourself.

Q. You've mentioned that telling you their stories is a therapeutic and empowering experience for many narrators. Of course, *Voice of Witness* also seeks to create change in the wider society. Do you have any sense of the impact the series has made in that regard?

A. [Lok] I think the impact shows up in the young. We try to make human rights activism accessible through the use of personal narratives, regardless of what your engagement with this issue is or is not. Our readers range from middle-school-aged readers to policy-makers and activists. One of the major places we see an impact is among students. They are probably the leading examples of the type of reader who does not have prior knowledge of or a prior interest in what is happening in Burma, Sudan, or Colombia, or in public housing in Chicago. The series helps to bring these issues alive and helps students feel that they have a participatory relationship with contemporary history. The testimonies we get from young people who have read these stories are incredible.

In a wider sense, the stories have been used in case law in many instances. Additionally, testimonies that have been featured in our books have been used in advocacy campaigns. For example, Ashley Jacobs, whose narrative is in the book *Inside This Place, Not of It*, was six months pregnant when she was imprisoned, and in prison, women are shackled to the bed during childbirth—something that she did not talk about, even to her family, because she felt ashamed about it. The process of telling the story with one of our education team members over the course of a year and a half was healing, empowering, and restorative. It eventually made her want to share her story with the wider public. She ended up working with her local branch of the ACLU to end the practice of shackling in women's prisons. We have seen some changes being made now in several states in the U.S., but there is still a long way to go.

A. [Eggers] I don't know what policies there are here in Belgium, but in the U.S., if a woman in prison goes to see the doctor, she has to be in chains or chained to the bed. This results in pregnant women giving birth with their legs chained to a steel bed—a barbaric and unconscionable practice, but nobody knew about it. By being told, this story became part of the public debate. Sometimes these first-person narratives can bring an issue to life in a way that a statistical approach could not.

Q. By focusing on the stories of individuals, though, don't you risk losing sight of the systemic nature of the injustices these people have suffered? How do you avoid individualizing and thereby

depoliticizing social, collective suffering? How do you ensure that the bigger picture is not being missed?

A. [Lok] I think you get at the universal through the particular. We make it so that each voice in a collection—there are usually around thirteen or fifteen voices per collection—highlights something different, a different side of the situation. Some stories can be taken as emblematic for a crisis, some are surprising in that this could have happened to this kind of person. Additionally, when someone mentions any kind of abuse or a specific situation, we'll contextualize that in a footnote. For example, if someone says that they were displaced from their farm in Colombia, we will show how tens of thousands of people experienced the same thing during that period. We also have appendices at the back of each book—a timeline, a glossary, mini-essays from reports—which provide background on the issues that are being discussed. Oftentimes, these are condensed reports from sources like Amnesty International or Human Rights Watch. We try to draw on a variety of sources to keep a somewhat objective and balanced overview of the situation.

A. [Eggers] I would just add that you almost always have a better understanding of a situation through a first-person narrative—seeing what one person says and then seeing a broader view of it. I'd been reading about the conflict in Colombia for twenty years; it's very hard to unpack because it's so complicated and there are so many different players. But I remember reading the very first narrative in the Colombia book, and instantly all of it made much more sense. I saw it through one person's eyes, saw the devolution of the country happen piece by piece, year by year. Rather than causing you to lose sight of the political dimension, I would suggest, testimonies are actually the best method to illuminate the political context.

Q. I've looked at quite a few Voice of Witness books, and two of the things that struck me are that they are heavily edited—they're not simply collections of transcribed oral history interviews—and there is no fixed format: the structure and organization of each volume is unique. Could you talk about why it is that you go beyond

simply collecting and transcribing interviews? And what determines the choice of a particular format for a particular book?

A. [Eggers] There is a long tradition of oral history, and it's practiced in different ways by different people. There is a very strong academic tradition of collecting oral histories, and some that I've read were quite dry and hard to follow. Sometimes they are a series of questions and answers rather than a linear narrative. We decided that the Voice of Witness books would edit everyone's story—no matter how it was originally told over the course of days, weeks, or years—into a linear narrative, without changing words. That would be what the reader could rely on—that we would tell a compelling linear narrative with the narrator's original words and phrasings and idiosyncrasies of speech, which takes some editing. Once we have the tapes, we transcribe them and put them into a linear order for clarity. We then take the transcript back to the person who told us the story, the narrator, to make sure we got it right. More often than not they will say, "You got it exactly right: that's how I told it to you"—even though it took us one hundred hours to get it into that shape, where it's clear and linear.

A. [Lok] I don't know if you've ever seen an oral transcript before, but it is like a big bowl of spaghetti thrown on the floor. Unless someone is a born storyteller, you calmly have to edit it all. Most people, myself included, jump around in time, misremember something, go back to correct something.

A. [Eggers] We do a disservice to them if, after their bravery in telling their story, we do not put it into a form that readers can read. Readers will not read a seventy-page transcript, so it does need to be edited. We serve the narrators well only when the book itself is compelling and can be read by a broad audience. That is how we honor their stories and their courage.

Q. The slogan on the Voice of Witness website reads, "Illuminating Human Rights Crises through Oral History." Given that there are, sadly, so many human rights crises that deserve attention, how do you decide which crisis to tackle next? Are you at all concerned about balance or comprehensive coverage, especially now that the

series has grown to such an extent that people might wonder why certain crises are not represented?

A. [Eggers] There are still only six people who work at Voice of Witness, which means that if there are a hundred topics that could be approached tomorrow, and deserve to be, we're still limited by the tiny staff and tiny funding that we have. That's one key part. Thirteen books in ten years is something we're very proud of, but it's a struggle to make them and to continue to exist in terms of funding.

A. [Lok] Another factor is the time it takes to create a book that we can be proud of and that does justice to the stories. Each book takes anywhere from one to four years to put together.

A. [Eggers] What we also get are proposals from editors who have an idea, but when we ask whether they are in it for the long haul—up to four years—they back out. So it's a very intricate process, which needs commitment from the editors and the constituents they are serving, and, most of all, time.

Q. You do not shy away from controversial topics. A particularly good example is your recent volume on life under Israeli occupation in the Palestinian territories, but I'm also thinking of the volumes on undocumented immigrants in the U.S. and on the plight of Muslim Americans in the wake of 9/11. What has the response been to these more politically sensitive collections? Do you deliberately try to redress the imbalances that you see in the dominant media and government narratives?

A. [Lok] It's our ambition to amplify unheard voices—people whose experiences and expertise don't get into the mainstream narrative on an issue. It's not our explicit mission statement to think about how we can be controversial. It's more about whether there is something in a proposal that's going to help us learn something new, shed new light on something.

Q. Do you take any flak over covering controversial issues?

A. [Eggers] Something that continues to amaze me is that nobody can argue with somebody's story. You simply cannot. They are not

opinions or polemics. We make a point of that: even if the narrators want to offer hours and hours of their opinions, we still turn it into a narrative that answers the question, "What happened?" When *Palestine Speaks* [2015] came out, we did think we would get a lot of flak. The editors were nervous when they went out on tour that it was going to be controversial. It turns out that those fears were unfounded; it has not been very controversial at all, simply because you cannot argue with someone's story. The book does not take a political position. It does not have a prescriptive solution to the relationship between Palestine and Israel. The stories themselves are the stories of people who live in the West Bank and Gaza. This is what they see, what they have been through. You can form your opinions from there. Because of that, and because we stay neutral on those sorts of issues, I think everyone is willing to come into it with an open mind. We hope that is the case, at least.

Q. The Voice of Witness book series is victim-centered, in the sense that the narrators whose stories we get to read are all victims of human rights violations. It could be argued that in order to fully understand what happened and why it happened, we also need to know the stories of the perpetrators. Have you ever considered also interviewing the perpetrators, as Jean Hatzfeld, for example, did in his extraordinary trilogy about the genocide in Rwanda?

A. [Lok] Yes, and we have in fact done that in some of our books. We've interviewed people who have been involved in committing crimes and become victims themselves, such as former child soldiers in Burma. The idea of working with a strict distinction between perpetrator and victim is reductive. There are different levels of perpetration. There is "dictator," and then there are child soldiers recruited to serve in an armed group for several years of their lives. So I think it's a lot more complex than victim versus perpetrator. But our mission is quite concise, quite focused: it is to amplify the voices of those most closely affected by human rights crises, and so we have to prioritize those.

A. [Eggers] Our specific aim is to provide a platform for the powerless. Those in power have their platform, which they have used in various ways. We feel that if we're going to talk about women in

U.S. prisons, those women have to be heard first, because we've already heard the other side. We've heard that they are criminals, that they deserve this, that rape is a normal and natural part of going to prison, that they deserve that—in the U.S. it's considered part of your punishment. We're trying to counteract that dominant narrative. As such, we're not aiming to compile comprehensive textbooks. Think of *Throwing Stones at the Moon: Colombians Displaced by Violence* [2012]. It's not everything you need to know about Colombia in one book. It is specifically a book about voices from everyday Colombians and how they've been affected by the drug wars and the chaos of the past twenty years.

Q. The focus in all of the volumes to date is on contemporary issues—ongoing human rights crises or very recent ones. Have you considered covering human rights violations that happened in the past yet might be instructive for the present?

A. [Lok] There is incredible work being done in that field by countless other organizations. But our focus on the contemporary is also a result of the fact that our medium is oral history: we focus on the stories of those who are living. Witnesses have a particular power and relevance. Let's not forget either that victims of, for example, the prison system in the U.S. are living now but that the systemic abuses to which they testify have been going on for decades.

Q. As a human rights activist, you see a lot of misery in the world that enrages you, but which you can often do very little about because of powerful interests stacked against you. How do you cope with that predicament?

A. [Lok] We've had this conversation recently. It's so easy to feel overwhelmed and discouraged, to be thrown into a state of paralysis, because the problems are so huge. But I think it's about figuring out where you can be useful, where you can fit in. You can't do everything, but each person has unique strengths and passions that can help to move the needle along. It's also important to find other people who think the same thing and want to do the same thing.

A. [Eggers] Also, if you focus on the micro-level and what you can actually change, then it's very rare to be discouraged. Think of 826

Valencia, for example. We could have said, “Let’s try to change all American educational policy and make equal opportunities for all!” By now, we would have been very frustrated, because we can’t do that at a national level. Instead, we started up this one center, in this one community. We focus on what we can do. We have two thousand volunteers in San Francisco who feel like they are changing something every day. They feel that electric charge when there is learning going on, and they focus on the difference they can make. That’s always going to happen when you’re engaged with real, hands-on work rather than engaging with something at the macro-level and thinking that just because you write an op-ed, it’s all going to change. You have to focus on the day-to-day work as opposed to the theoretical and more frustrating work, where you know what needs to change but cannot effect that change.

A. [Lok] I should mention that even though we’ve been saying that we are just six people, every book involves at least twenty to thirty people who help us—fact-checkers, translators, and so on—as well as dozens of volunteers. For them, it’s the time they put into the one small piece of that picture that is meaningful.

A. [Eggers] Whatever you do, though, don’t accept any cynicism. Don’t allow yourself to become cynical, especially before you’ve tried. The cynicism that I felt in my twenties, that nothing would have an impact—that was a terrible mistake. It’s just a matter of finding something where you can make a difference. The cynics usually are not directly engaged in anything. They’re floating above, saying, “I sent an email, it didn’t have any effect, so I quit.” I did that in my twenties: I wrote an article, and it didn’t have any effect. Never let yourself descend into that. You can have a profound impact, but it’s about where and how and when. It’s about being serious and putting in the time, staying, and being courageous and fierce and true about it.