

Catherine Gallagher, Berkeley Book Chats, Oct 3, 2018

Timothy Hampton: Welcome to Berkeley Book Chats. I'm Timothy Hampton, director of the Townsend Center for the Humanities.

Berkeley Book Chats showcase a Berkeley faculty member engaged in a public conversation about a recently completed work. This popular series highlights the richness of Berkeley's academic community.

Today's conversation features Catherine Gallagher of the English Department discussing her book *Telling It Like It Wasn't*.

He is joined by Thomas Laqueur of the Department of History.

Thomas Laqueur: Thank you. So in 1994, Cathy's book, *Nobody's Story*, which I'm gonna return to in a little bit, won the MLA James Russell Lowell Prize for an outstanding scholarly work in literary studies. And just this year, the new book, the 2018 Jacques Barzun Prize from the American Philosophical Society for this year's best book in cultural history.

Thomas Laqueur: So it's a cultural history actually of writing history, and of writing fiction, and thinking historically about these philosophical problems of necessity and contingency. I don't think Cathy needs a very big introduction. I think you all know her. Her first book was the *British Industrial Novel*, and then *Practicing New Historicism*, then *The Body Economic*, and then this one. And we edited a book together. It's been a spectacular, important literary career at Berkeley. She was also chair of the English department and a founder of *Representations*. She is one of the great and good of campus, as all of you know.

Thomas Laqueur: Now, before I really enter into a conversation with her and say something about the book, I want to make a confession. In the late 1990s, Cathy proposed that we teach a seminar on counterfactuals, and I would teach anything with Cathy, so I said, "Sure." But I thought, and I actually said to her that this was really a snooze of a problem, you know, philosophy was going just going on endlessly about conditional probabilities.

Thomas Laqueur: In philosophy, one, you learned about Hume's big move in defining cause as an object followed by another, or all the objects similar to the first, or followed by objects similar to the second. And then the second part of that, which everyone says doesn't follow, where if the first object had not been, the second never had existed. And so the relationship between these two phrases, you know, it's important. But we've done that.

Thomas Laqueur: And if you actually get into this more technical set of issues about counterfactuals, about what are the conditions of S, when conjoined with A, apply C. In philosophy they were crazy about this. And then there's possible world semantics and there was Kripke. And I thought all this stuff... It's all above our heads, and should be left with the philosophers. And there was actually nothing interesting literary to say about this. And the few novels that at that point Cathy had proposed, I didn't think were such great novels. And I just wanna say that I was wrong. I was totally and completely wrong.

- Catherine Gallagher: We have this on tape.
- Thomas Laqueur: It's a spectacularly good book. It's philosophically provocative, it's humane, it's widely learned. I still don't think all the novels she talks about are such great novels, but the book is beautifully written. And this is a history of thinking about the issue she's thinking about, it just couldn't be better. So the APS has it right in giving her the prize for the best book in cultural history.
- Thomas Laqueur: So what's this book about? Well, she says it's about why we conduct counterfactual thought experiences. It's not about the philosophical issue, it's about the question, why we as thinkers engage with this question. And she asks it both as a formal question that's important for literary studies, and as a historical question. In other words, she wants to argue that this question is not an eternal philosophical question, but a question that itself has a particular history. It begins in the late 17th century, it has particularly literary consequences in the 19th and in the 20th century, and after the Second World War.
- Thomas Laqueur: So in some sense, it's sort of philosophy becoming history. The collection is organized in three parts, which in some sense correspond to three genres of counterfactuals. One are what she calls analytic counterfactuals, which are often histories of war, histories of crisis. These have their roots in philosophical thinking in Leibniz and in Hobbes, but very particularly in military thinking, where the results of battles are not the consequence of providence necessarily, but it's something that some general did or didn't do. And one studies them in order to find out whether this is the optimal strategy for winning this war.
- Thomas Laqueur: The second genre which is interesting is these divergent fictional worlds that say when the world diverges from what actually happened in the world, which has real characters. So in other words, Abraham Lincoln and Gladstone, and these characters actually figure.
- Thomas Laqueur: And the third genre is these alternative histories, which are not just disjunctive histories in the form of the counterfactual, but also then have fictional characters. So it goes in some sense, it's analytic, and then narrative in the division, and then the narratives are ones which have a more direct connection to the world as it actually happened, and ones which don't have a connection to this world.
- Thomas Laqueur: But though she makes these distinct, the book actually deals with them as a whole. That is what she calls the cultural ecology of counterfactuals, which includes the narrative and the analytic form and the different versions of the narrative form.
- Thomas Laqueur: So why do we do this? Well, she says these forms are all about imagining a past, and therefore imagining a different future. In some cases this speaks to Tim's point about activism, there's a whole chapter really which looks at counterfactuals as a way in some sense of repairing the past, as a way, for example affirmative action, or ways of saying, if we had done something different, something would have happened, and we could actually fix it.
- Thomas Laqueur: So there are formal concerns that I wanna come to. There are serious political concerns. And throughout, there are philosophical concerns. I don't think Cathy would say that she argues these philosophical issues, and she's not in a debate with Kripke or with Goldman or with Lewis or these people. But she takes the kind of claims they make as being important for literary moves that I'm gonna talk about in just a second.

- Thomas Laqueur: So how does the book proceed? Well, it starts with actually a history of the analytic mode, and that Leibniz and Hume, whom I just mentioned, who's kind of important to both of us actually, Hume. And then onto Clausewitz, and the relationship of this kind of alternative history writing to thinking about providentiality, and other possible worlds.
- Thomas Laqueur: And then we move to the narrative and a history of those. So those start with a discussion of French earlier 19th century narratives, which are really about what could have happened to have not made these regrettable events in French history happen. And there were a lot, as Cathy points out, a lot of regrettable events, to some people at least, in the late 18th and in the late 19th century.
- Thomas Laqueur: And the last part then moves to the late 19th century in America, where a regrettable event is not as crucial, but what could've, might've happened still is. And so then it's divided into two kinds of national histories. One is the Civil War story, she calls it *Why We Lost the Civil War*, but it's basically stories about what if the Civil War had turned out different, what might have happened with especially issues of race and slavery and so forth.
- Thomas Laqueur: Then there's the one I mentioned that's about alternative narratives and making the past right, that she says, "Novels and shifting legal, political landscape, improving the present by changing the past, gave form to elusive hopes, fears, and frustrations." And she resurrects here novels that even the most learned amongst you I suspect would not have heard of, *Bring Back the Jubilee* by Ward Moore, a long lost Balzac.
- Thomas Laqueur: And then the last two are about Nazi Britain, and what would have happened if the Nazis had won. So that's the outline of the book, and you can see it's very broad. It deals with big, important, serious issues, and with the history of thinking about them, and thinking about the forms they're in. So that's I think a fair description of the book.
- Catherine Gallagher: Yeah.
- Thomas Laqueur: So let me just, I was gonna post three questions to move us into the discussion. The first question actually deals with your relationship to the formalist concerns in a historical context. So I thought this book actually has a lot in common with *Nobody's Story*, where *Nobody's Story* is a book about nobodies, that is to say authorial personae, and about people who didn't happen ...
- Catherine Gallagher: And fictional characters.
- Thomas Laqueur: ... and fictional characters, on the one hand. And so it's about the issues of fictionality, which has been central in your thinking. And those books are not, quote, "counterfactual," but they are counterfactual in the sense that they were also about nobodies. So there's a negative in both of these, what didn't happen.
- Thomas Laqueur: So I wonder if you could, maybe just in terms of thinking how you got into what I thought was originally an implausible topic, and whether you see a continuity between this book and the next book, so just can you talk a little about the history of your thinking about the issues?
- Catherine Gallagher: Okay. Yes, you're definitely right to see a connection between nobody-ness and wasn't-ness, you can put it that way. But what intrigued me was the question of whether or not what I now call a counterfactual character is also a fictional character. So is that a fiction in the same sense that ... Is Napoleon in an alternate

history narrative fictional in the same way that Anna Karenina is? Is that the same kind of fictionality.

Catherine Gallagher: And in some ways, my argument about the novel has always been that it's not the first recognized fiction, but it's the first form that makes a virtue out of the invention of characters, that is of identities that did not exist before, that that's what's different about novelistic fictionality, and that's what's always been at the center of the form.

Catherine Gallagher: So then counterfactual characters, counterfactual fictionality seems to go almost in the opposite way. You take an identity and what you do with it is tell a different story about it. So the fictionality is all in the fable, it's all on the plot side. But you have to, in some sense, stay true to the historical identity that you've chosen. A technical way to say that is the proper names still functions in that Kripkean way, in that Millsean way, to indicate an individual in our universe somehow.

Catherine Gallagher: So that's what really interested me, this kind of almost backwards way in which fiction seemed to be working in counterfactual narratives. And it requires a kind of delicate operation, analytical operation that I'm certainly not a good enough surgeon to always maintain, and that is a distinction between identity and character. So the identity is ... and I get this from Bernard Williams, who is a tremendous influence on the way I think about these things. And what Bernard Williams said is that what Kripke has and what Mills had was what he called a zygotic idea of identity. It's really more or less the DNA, it's the genealogical stuff that makes the identity.

Catherine Gallagher: Whereas character is something different. Character, as we use that term normally, but also as we use it in literary terms, is something that's in constant interaction with conditions and context. So what the counterfactualist does is say to take an identity, say Napoleon, and then start applying different conditions to that identity to see what might emerge in the character, what else might emerge in the character. We do use the word character to mean not just what you've done, but what you might do.

Catherine Gallagher: And so that's part of the argument of the book is that we actually use counterfactuals all the time just to define who we are, just to figure out whether or not we wanna lend to somebody, or whether or not we wanna marry somebody, or whether or not we wanna hire somebody. We're constantly wondering, "What's in that person? What's that person capable of? What's in there that maybe hasn't come to the surface yet?"

Catherine Gallagher: So that I think is what counterfactualism is centrally about. And we do that with collective entities too, you know, what are we as a people? Obama was constantly telling us, "That's not us, that's not who we are. We don't do things like that." And of course in crisis times, collectivities often have to be kind of vacated of what they've been doing, and a whole lot of new virtues and aptitudes and projects have to be added to them. So we're always breaking down national characters and building them up again.

Catherine Gallagher: And that's very much what counterfactuals, especially about our big national unresolved crises, like America's racial and sectional problems, so who are we as a United States, which is why most American historical counterfactuals are about the Civil War or about Reconstruction. And I deal with the Civil War and Reconstruction as a complex of issues, so constantly sort of breaking it down, what else could've been done? Remember when Donald Trump said, "You know

that Civil War thing, that would never have happened on my watch. That would've been so easy to avoid," the biggest debate in American historiography, as if nobody had ever thought of this before.

Catherine Gallagher: And for the British, the question is still - at the time I finished the book, I thought it had been settled, but it's not - are the British European? And the counterfactual period that deals with that most explicitly is really the period between May of 1940 and that point at which the US entered the war, at the end of '41. And that has to do with the question of whether or not the British are going to be invaded. So the invasion counterfactual is a constant in British collective life. And it played out again, on both sides, it always interestingly plays out on both sides of the question of Europeanness, it played out on both sides in the debate over Brexit.

Catherine Gallagher: So those are the things we continue to think about as nations. We continue to sort of use these things, these might have beens to try to figure out who we are. To the extent that a national character is always a fiction, I think that's certainly true. But it's not a fiction in the same sense that Anna Karenina is a fiction. It's not the same kind of fiction. It's not as if we just sort of invent. We have a history, we read our history to figure out what we did and also what else we might have done, everything that happened and everything that might have happened, in order to judge ourselves, and to ask ourselves about what path we should follow in the future.

Catherine Gallagher: So that's the connection between the two.

Thomas Laqueur: We'll come back to the character in a second. But I wanna push you a little bit about the trajectory of your career, and how you really got onto this, because in the 90s, when you first started thinking about this, counterfactuals we're not a big topic in literary studies. I mean, we had this sort of can Sherlock Holmes meet Gladstone kind of issue. But that was a pretty minor subgenre of philosophical and aesthetic thinking.

Thomas Laqueur: And much of your work grows out of your engagement with sort of major writers. You're interested in small particular texts, and big Dickens texts. And this book is about major characters. This is not motivated by your particular interest in Moore or these relatively obscure writers. What made you have faith when your friends, well, I should just say me, but I don't know what your other friends said, thought this was a...

Catherine Gallagher: Just about every historian I talked to.

Thomas Laqueur: Yeah, thought this was useless ... Well, not many literary critics could've been keen on this, 'cause they wouldn't know what you're talking about. So is it theoretical?

Catherine Gallagher: Well, partly it's theoretical. So partly it did have to do with constantly worrying the issues of fictionality and character, and fictionality outside the novel, and other genres of fictionality. So partly that was it.

Catherine Gallagher: But the thing I think that was really important in the 1990s also, and then again in the early 2000s for slightly different reasons, was the question of temporality and narrative form. That was extremely important at the time. And there were a lot of experiments to try to take in the newest discoveries in physics, and wondering about backward causality and other kinds of causality, and splitting universes, and all this sort of thing. I mean, I'd always had a kind of amateur

interest in science fiction, just as I'd always had an amateur interest in military history.

Catherine Gallagher: So in a way, this was kind of just pulling on adolescent interests of mine that were still hanging around, especially the interest in time travel, in backward causality, in plot types. And so partly it was that. And also in social justice.

Catherine Gallagher: So the first thing I wrote on the topic was called Undoing, and it was on the way that the movie Back to the Future uses time travel as a way of thinking about racial, class, and ethnic antagonism, and repairing injustice in the past.

Catherine Gallagher: And that also connected with the law, the legal justifications that were given for affirmative action, which I was very interested in, which were mainly drawn from tort law and tort law ways of asking whether or not, if it hadn't been say for Plessy versus Ferguson, African Americans would have had difficulty getting into good colleges that they had.

Catherine Gallagher: So what the Supreme Court should do, because they're after all responsible for Plessy versus Ferguson, is allow UC's affirmative action program to stand, that sort of question. And that's actually one of the arguments that's made in the decision that finally comes down.

Catherine Gallagher: So I was interested in the odd way in which science fiction and backward time travel and social justice were coming together. And I've always been interested in sort of grabbing things from one part of culture and trying to put them together with something that seems really completely disparate, but is also somehow informed by that.

Thomas Laqueur: Before we open it up, I wanna just go back to those issues you raised about character, both individual character and national character. So the idea of character that's crucial in the book is that, and it's also probably true in life, is that there's like a transworld identity. I mean, Hitler is Hitler in all possible worlds, and Hitler would be Hitler even if Hitler hadn't been born. I mean, a Hitleresque character does the Hitler role. And then of course the issue of these permanently unfinished characters, the JFK who dies, and you imagine what would a second term have been like, you sort of imagine how this character would exist in a world in which he doesn't exist.

Thomas Laqueur: So you sort of solve this by claiming, well, this is a Kripkean identity, which is Adamic naming, that is to say, at the beginning of times, Aristotle was named Aristotle, and that's the Adamic characterization of him, whatever.

Thomas Laqueur: But when you're talking about Hitler and JFK, you're talking about character not as identity you're talking about it in a different way, that there's something intrinsic about someone, like they have a character. It's almost humanism. So there's that version of what I asked you about character.

Thomas Laqueur: And the second thing is your take on national history. So back in the 60s and 70s, national character was big. Ruth Benedict and Margaret Mead and all these people talked about the national character of the Japanese. Remember there were all these World War II studies.

Catherine Gallagher: Oh, World War II is very big. And one of the interesting things that they say is, as Margaret Mead says, "Look, this sounds very old-fashioned, but you actually have to have this."

- Thomas Laqueur: So I want to ask you about that both individually and are we sort of just left with the idea not of identity in the Kripkean sense, but we need character, and counterfactuals gives you a way of thinking about character, we need national character ...
- Catherine Gallagher: Or you could put it this way, we will always do counterfactuals. We'll always wonder what are the potentials of that entity, right? What is that thing capable of doing? Whatever it is, what might it do? And the thing we call that is character. I mean, I could've come up with a different term, but ...
- Thomas Laqueur: Right, but it's different in your fiction, Anna Karenina can only act in the way Anna Karenina acts.
- Catherine Gallagher: See, now that's the interesting thing. See, what the novelist does, what the realist novelist does usually is to mime those other possibilities in the narrative itself, so that the reason Anna Karenina is a realist novel is that we can sit around and talk about what else she might have done. And we do, endlessly. I mean, if you've ever taught any novel, you know that's what we are really, really interested in. They're interested in why she did what she did, whereas she might have done something else. And any good realist novel will open up all sorts of possibilities and then shut them down. That's kind of the definition of realism, is the sense that there's this way in which we are led to believe that this nobody, this nonliving thing, this product of someone's imagination, has the kind of infinity of possibilities that we ourselves have.
- Catherine Gallagher: And so, realist novels are humanistic. But you get a lot of current novels that are doing very different kinds of things. Kate Atkinson, how many here have read *Life After Life*? It's great, because it takes that idea of an identity and sends it off in about 11 different directions. I think that's about the number of them.
- Catherine Gallagher: So you pick it up, it starts in the same place and time, and then there's a life, and another life, and another life, and another life, and another life, but nobody would say, "There's this identity and that identity," 'cause it wouldn't work that way. It's gotta be a fan. It's gotta be fanning out from some moment for that character.
- Catherine Gallagher: So that's another way of doing it. It's just realizing each one of the possibilities for that woman, and for that country. I mean, as Kate Atkinson said, this is a novel of national character. So she's going through the different possibilities for a woman who's born between the wars.
- Catherine Gallagher: So yeah, so it's humanism in the sense that it's just the notion that "I could've been a contender." That's the most pathetic line in all of American film, that we could've been different from what we are, both for good and for bad. This is the pathos of life. This is what we have to come to terms with, only one set of possibilities is gonna be realized.
- Thomas Laqueur: Well, that clearly becomes the anti-Nietzschean position. But anyway let's open this up. Yeah?
- Speaker 1: Just thinking of the well-known distinction among historical characters, for example Lenin, it's said without Lenin there would've been no second Russian Revolution. But for other characters, as you can imagine, other things would have happened to whoever was there, these event-making people.

- Speaker 1: But that aside, the question I wanted to ask really was addressed to Tom within the domain of history. As somebody who's not a historian but has attended some history of science seminars, I can remember being virtually attacked by a graduate student visiting from the University of Chicago, who said to me, "You ask the strangest questions, you know, counterfactual questions. This is outside the realm of the field."
- Speaker 1: The question I had asked was, after somebody had made a presentation about a particularly great discovery, the sources of the Cretaceous tertiary die-off of the dinosaurs, which involved a very big team of scientists here at Berkeley, and I asked, "Well, what did it require on this team? I mean, how many different specialists, how many different geologists, a physicist, and other people involved. And I thought it was a reasonable question. And she felt it was beyond the pale kind of thing historians should not be getting into."
- Speaker 1: So within the field of history, among your students, do you ban counterfactual questions or approaches?
- Thomas Laqueur: We try not to. But that's why I was against this project, but I think the argument of the book is that in fact all historical arguments, all arguments about cause are arguments about this. And we could argue, had it not been for Alvarez, or had it not been for whatever makes it possible to collect all these people, I mean, different stories. Is that right?
- Catherine Gallagher: Yeah, different stories. And I don't wanna make it sound as if, because I've been concentrating on character, I've made it sound as though this book is about character. I mean, this is an argument that runs through the book.
- Thomas Laqueur: The whole first book is about the analytic structures of these kinds of historical arguments.
- Catherine Gallagher: Yeah, exactly. But at the same time, this is not a book that deals with the actions of individuals all the time, not by any means. And one of the other points of the book is that the counterfactual characters who we choose to look at often have this scaling up possibility, that is, the point is not so much what else could've happened while Napoleon was delaying in Moscow after the city was burned down, what he should've done. It's about the history of the French people after he does something different. So the actors in these narratives are very often national, big collective actors. So that's the question, that's why the questions of say national character keep coming up.
- Catherine Gallagher: Now, an interesting thing about that is that, as one of my friends who also works on this topic says, once you move from the individual to the collective, you get a much weaker sense of agency. That is exactly how does the national character come together and do this or that, or the other thing? And many of the novels are precisely about that. They are about the workings, the finding, again, of the national type that usually will repair the damage from the catastrophe that happened because you all got lazy and made a dishonorable peace with Germany, and now you're really in hot water.
- Catherine Gallagher: So a lot of the novels are precisely about that kind of thing, but they do require collective action. They require the breaking down of the polity, often the destruction of the state, and its coming together on some newer, more purposeful basis. So that's what a lot of these stories are.

- Catherine Gallagher: Roth's Plot Against America is exactly that kind of narrative. And one of the things that it does of course is sort of to reconcile you to the state that you have, right? I mean, it's a whole lot better than what you would have had if you had allowed that Nazi takeover, or if you hadn't fought the Civil War, and you still have some sort of South Africa-like state on your border threatening you with nuclear war, think about what that would be like.
- Catherine Gallagher: So a lot of them have these kinds of slightly dystopian, utopian kinds of dialectics inside them, and are not actually about say Napoleon.
- Thomas Laqueur: I tried to make the point, and I think you would say that the interesting thing about this book, or the compelling thing about the book is that while it deals with what kind of questions historians should ask, that's not what it is. It won the prize for the book in cultural history because it actually is a cultural history of thinking this way, rather than of the legitimacy of thinking this way.
- Thomas Laqueur: So the British start worrying about this after the war, you know, it's a devastating war, and they think, "Well, what might have happened had it been different? What kind of people are we?" And likewise, the American civil rights movement.
- Thomas Laqueur: And likewise about Clausewitz and providence. It's not that people just come out of nowhere and all of a sudden start dealing with conditional propositions. It's that there's a particular historical moment in which those become exigent, either collectively or individually. So especially the Leibniz ... the Clausewitz is a real cultural intellectual history of thinking about how the world might work if every moment isn't predicted by God, or isn't predicted by God right?
- Thomas Laqueur: So it's a history and literary book, not philosophical. It's not prescriptive either.
- Catherine Gallagher: Right. But the question also was, do you discourage students in history departments from asking counterfactual questions?
- Thomas Laqueur: Well, I mean you do want students to think about what's remarkable about some event. I always wonder, is a big part of thinking about history, why would someone have that position? In some sense, if you have this notion of wonder, it does lead you to ask what produces it, why isn't this ordinary? And that has a counterfactual involved in it. It's just, you don't go to the archive and ask a counterfactual question directly. But it's certainly there.
- Thomas Laqueur: And if you think about the importance of a scientist, for example, you need to sort of ask, what is it that made possible that discovery then?
- Thomas Laqueur: So in that sense, the counterfactual is the background. But it's not, go to the archive and prove or investigate a counterfactual.
- Veronica: I'm Veronica Mitnocht. I'm a graduate student in the English department. I work on the 19th century, and I was wondering what you would make in this sort of cultural history of, like the sort of 19th century utopianist texts, like Looking Backwards or News From Nowhere, or even Utopia, which are not exactly counterfactuals, but there's a suggestion that we're not on track to achieve those futures. And then there's a hope that the publication of this text might alter that. So you were talking about the idea of a purpose of some counterfactuals being to sort of reconcile you to the current status of the world, or of status quo, and these are texts that sort of do the opposite, where they have a sort of counterfactual quality, but its purpose is actually to sort of challenge your acceptance of the

status quo. And I guess I'm wondering how that fits into the sort of cultural narrative.

Gallagher: Right, but see, not all counterfactuals, by any means, are there to justify the status quo. So I don't wanna leave you with that impression at all. Even the dystopian ones very often make connections between the history that might have happened, and the disasters that might have followed, and what we are actually living. So Ward Moore's *Bring the Jubilee* is actually constantly saying, "Look, we're living as though the South won the Civil War." This was a big concern of his, and it's right at the beginning of the civil rights era.

Gallagher: So there's lots of counterfactual novels about that, especially *Looking Backwards* is an important novel for the more utopian brand. And oddly and embarrassingly, the first counterfactual novel about the Civil War is a slave state utopia. And it starts pretty much the same way, somebody falls asleep and ends up, not in time travel, not going forward in time, but somehow skipping into another reality and finding himself on a plantation in the late 19th century, where this paternalistic slave utopia has been created.

Thomas Laqueur: That was 1900 and happily forgotten.

Gallagher: 1900 and happily forgotten, and I found one review of it. The first British counterfactual novel is actually a novel of invasion. Oddly enough, it's a novel of a Napoleonic invasion. And that also is 1900, exactly. They're really twins. One about the Civil War, one about the invasion. These are the national preoccupations, even before the Second World War was fought.

Gallagher: And that one is very much based on a normal sort of Walter Scott style historical novel. That's what it's like. So those are the two forms that you find. They are very much 19th century forms.

Thomas Laqueur: But there is a nowhere part, like *News from Nowhere*, there's a sort of not existing version, right?

Gallagher: Yes, there is that, yeah. That's right.

Radi Reed: Thank you very much for this interesting discussion. I'm Radi Reed. I'm recently retired from UC San Diego, the literature department. I'm fascinated by this interplay that seems to be a particularly intimate relationship between the question of character and the counterfactual. It's almost an epistemological issue in the sense that allegations about character are difficult to prove and difficult to disprove. And that's the fascination of character. There's an endless speculation as to what that person was, what character might become, what potentials might be revealed through interactions of all different kinds.

Radi Reed: And I wanna bring it to very much our present moment in the sense that that epistemological uncertainty can be weaponized. And I'm not thinking of the last two weeks. I'm thinking actually of George Bush and Saddam Hussein, and Bush's claim that there were these weapons of mass destruction.

Radi Reed: Brian Massumi, he's an interesting political philosopher at the University of Montreal, he has a phrase that felt counterfactual. He's very much into affect theory, and he's actually very much interested in the revolution in military affairs. And that's a whole other development and a whole other topic.

- Radi Reed: But what he points out, and this is I guess my question, with Saddam Hussein, you had something of a double conditional. It's not so much that he didn't have weapons of mass destruction. They couldn't prove it. It's, had he had them, he would've used them. And that can't be disproven. And is a form of character assassination. I mean, he's a pretty vile person of course.
- Radi Reed: But it was that allegation, that claim that couldn't be disproved, but effectively went to the heart of whoever was receiving this message worried about a potential threat to the wellbeing of our nation and so on and so forth. So it's this weaponizing of that epistemological uncertainty that's very much in that dyad character and counterfactual that I find interesting. And I was just wondering what your thoughts might be.
- Gallagher: Yeah, that is very interesting. I mean, I think that that's a good example of why it is that we will never stop doing counterfactuals, you know? Especially since we live in a democracy, this is precisely the way our political discourse goes. And it doesn't seem to me that there's really a chance of that ever ending, of becoming something else.
- Gallagher: So as much as I think it's important in this day and age to think about the importance of fact, and to understand when you're using a counterfactual, and not simply referring to a fact, it still doesn't seem to me that we're ever going to be able to say, "Well, these are the facts and we can draw our conclusions simply on the basis of that."
- Catherine Gallagher: It's interesting to me though that you say that this thinker thinks that most people were more convinced by the idea that, because he's Saddam Hussein and is the character he is, he will use them if he has them. I think most people really felt lied to when they found out that the weapons weren't there, you know?
- Speaker 3: So I just wonder if you could contextualize a little bit more the kind of historical scope of the project, because it does seem to have to do with a particular modernity? It has to do with a particular model of historical thinking.
- Catherine Gallagher: Yes, it does.
- Speaker 3: A particular model of representation, which would be the realist novel. When you were talking about characters, I was thinking of a moment in Brecht's writings on the theater, where he says that the actor in the epic theater should speak his lines in such a way that we can see all the alternative interpretations that he might do. And so that would be that kind of fragmentation of character, which would be the kind of modernist gesture.
- Catherine Gallagher: Yes, it is.
- Speaker 3: And that would be the kind of end of this kind of realism. So it seems to me what you're suggesting is that the kind of political weaponization of counterfactuality is linked to a sort of almost kind of zombie-like vestigiality of a kind of realism that continues to haunt us and dominate us in some kind of way, at least in discourse in the public sphere, maybe.
- Catherine Gallagher: That's interesting. But it seems to me that actually there's not such a big difference between the fragmentation and the notion of character to begin with. I think that what that is, is a kind of display of the fact that any character has to seem real to us, has to seem partly unrealized, right? That is, that there's gotta be something in what we associate with that proper name that never quite gets to

get out into the sunlight and act out its part. That's the point. And so that's there in the realist novel. And then it's very much there in what's called the post-realist novel, but as the kind of working out of each one of those things, that kind of fragmentation.

Catherine Gallagher: So that's what interests me is that in the 19th century there's a way in which counterfactual narratives are already doing that. And that's why they seem kind of weirdly postmodernist. And it's there already in the military historians, who will sort of proliferate like five or six different things that could have happened, and they'll go off in this direction and that direction and the other direction. You'll have five things that didn't happen, and one thing that did happen. And if you don't really know these wars very well to begin with, the sideshadowing really overshadows the actual war.

Catherine Gallagher: So that's really a kind of postmodernist technique. And you see it very much in Clausewitz for example. But you also then immediately see it when you get a 600 page story of what Napoleon and the French do after Napoleon marches on Petersburg and basically takes over the world, so what then happens in a world which is French dominated.

Catherine Gallagher: And at the same time, it's constantly keying you into what's actually going on, to what actually happened in that history, and even what's actually going on at the time of the writing. So you're always reading on these two tracks. And all those characters have proper names that refer to people who actually were historical characters, and they all act kind of in character but under different circumstances.

Catherine Gallagher: So I would say that realism is already vestigial as soon as you start realizing counterfactual narratives.

Thomas Laqueur: One last question.

Jeff: Thank you for the fascinating presentation. My name is Jeff Peer. I'm a visiting researcher from the City University of New York, and one of the things I work on is a similar sort of experiment at the limits of factuality, the nonfiction novel. And if I can be permitted to ask another question about this distinction between character and identity, an interesting thing about the nonfiction novel, its authors often sort of disingenuously claim that the characters in their books are exactly the same as the real life people walking around with the same name.

Jeff: And my question is, to what degree is the distinction between character and identity do you think a function of genre, or a lack of clarity between the genres, between the simplicity of the fictional/nonfictional binary, and the different kinds of fictions. You said Anna Karenina is another kind of fiction than a counterfactual character for example.

Catherine Gallagher: Yeah. It's really such a rich topic. And I think that when we say fictional, we often mean fictional characters. That's what we often mean. I think even the realist novel has been the primary instance of fictionality for us. And we haven't really been able to look at fictionality in other kinds of genres. This is one attempt to do so.

Catherine Gallagher: I guess I'm relying heavily on the distinction between identity and character here, because I don't know what else to call these things. So I'm not so sure that ... I'll put this way, identity has now really changed its meaning. I mean, if you have identity theft, it doesn't mean that somebody is now ...

Jeff: You.

Catherine Gallagher: You can't really have character theft in the same way. So there's that.

Catherine Gallagher: But one of the problems with using the term is that identity now seems to refer to collective identity. So it's about your ethnicity, and it's about your race, it's about your nationality. It may even be partly about the section of the country that you come from. Whatever you identify with is what we're now calling identity.

Catherine Gallagher: So that certainly is ... For me, those are all aspects of character. They have nothing to do with identity, which I am sort of continuing to insist in a kind of legalistic way, right? I mean, the police are the last people who wanna get rid of the idea of identity, and let it just become character.

Catherine Gallagher: So I'm not sure it's a lack of clarity. But I do think that when we get into fictions, the genre you're looking at really relies on the identity character difference, right?

Thomas Laqueur: I just would urge you all to think more about this. This really is a spectacular book. No kidding.