Recall This Book
Episode 151: Why I Panel, Part One: Kristin Mahoney, Nasser Mufti (JP)

John Plotz
From Brandeis University, hello. Welcome to Recall This Book, where we assemble scholars and writers from different disciplines to make sense of contemporary issues, problems, and events.I'm John Plotz, not joined by Elizabeth Ferry today. And this is the first installment of a new series, which is tentatively called Why I Panel, or you might call it Academia Behind Closed Doors.

So here's the idea. Like most of the professors I know, I'm both haunted and energized by the task of writing papers for my peers and traveling to strange campuses to deliver them under their wary or needy or alarmed or judgmental or even occasionally amused gazes. I heard Sheila Jasanoff describing attending academic conferences as an act of externalized self-promising.

That seems to me like a deep truth. So today we're going to assemble three scholars who have agreed to be on a panel at the Northeast Victorian Studies Conference together at the time of this recording that conference is about 10 days off.

The scholars (and I am one of them) are going to discuss their hopes and dreams and fears. And then through the magic of podcast editing, you'll also be able to hear the same scholars meeting to debrief after the conference.

So with that, I want to just turn to introducing the generous scholars who have agreed to do this somewhat foolhardy experiment with me. So in alphabetical order, first, it's a delight to introduce Kristin Mahoney, who is a Michigan State University Professor in the fields of English and Gender Studies.

And her books include *Literature and the Politics of Post-Victorian Decadence*, (Cambridge 2015) and *Queer Kinship After Wilde: Transnational Decadence and the Family*. She's currently working on a project which we're going to hear a lot more about now, entitled “Love's Cross-Currents, Transnational Affinities Between India and Ireland, 1880 to 1930.” So Kristin, welcome.

Kristin Mahoney:
Thank you so much. Thank you for having me here. It's a pleasure. And then our second scholar is Nasser Mufti, both an English professor and a proud UIC United Union member at the University of Illinois at Chicago.

His wonderful first book was *Civilizing War, Imperial Politics and the Poetics of National Rupture.* And he's currently working on a monograph about what Britain's 19th century looks like from the perspective of such anti-colonial thinkers as CLR. James and Eric Williams.

So the theme of the conference is the 20th century. And I think because of that, both of you, when you were proposing what you were going to talk about on the panel, were really foregrounding questions of temporality.

KM:
When you wrote to me to talk about doing this podcast, I was at the Theosophical Society headquarters in Chennai doing research for this new project on Irish and Indian affinities. And I'm thinking a lot about the way that theosophy was a sort of conduit for the kinds of connections I'm thinking about, oftentimes forms of anti-colonial resistance that were being generated between Irish and Indian subjects at the turn of the century.

And when I was there, I was looking at some of the letters that were written in between Annie Besant, who was the president of the Theosophical Society at the turn of the century, between her and Jiddu Krishnamurti, who was a teenage boy who she basically adopted, who her right-hand man Charles Ledbetter found on the grounds of the Theosophical Society.

He had, in fact, his father was still alive, and they kind of extracted this teenage boy from his family and adopted him and kind of placed him at the center of the operations of the Theosophical Society, decided that he was going to be the world teacher. I was looking in the letters that they were writing back and forth about the way that she was thinking about ideas about reincarnation and the way that she was sort of thinking about the relationship that existed between them as a relationship that had existed in deep time.

So I'm going to talk in my talk quite a bit about this one letter where she talks about the fact that they have been connected since they were animals. Maybe

they were actually even connected when they were plants, she says.

And then she also says that they could have even been connected when they were minerals, that they were in fact kind of that one of them was a crystal and the other one was a bit of gold within that crystal. So thinking about these kinds of questions of temporality that are so central to Theosophy's way of thinking about the coming of these new kind of possible revolutionary futures and the way that these forms of kinship are operating within that.

So that's like what I'm going to be focusing on and then I'm hoping to kind of use that to reflect on the value of thinking about these kinds of these movements that I think we often think about as deeply Victorian and the way that they extend into the 20th century and how we can get such sharp and understandings of them when we think about them as happening across the turn of the century and seeing where the kind of stories that we begin to tell as Victorianists end in the early 20th century or don't end, but the way that they continue into the 20th century and how much richer our understanding of those energies and those movements become when we think in that way.

JP:
Awesome. I love that the 20th century brought you back to mineral time. You know, that seems so appropriate and I can already hear lots of connections actually that I haven't kind of picked up with my science fiction thinking, so this is great. Okay, Nasser, you're up.

Nasser Mufti:
So, the talk is from the book project, which it begins in a kind of observation that between 1963 and 64, anti-colonial, post-colonial thinkers, all from the same island, namely CLR. James, Eric Williams, and V.S. Naipaul.

They all in different ways publish these histories of 19th century British culture. My next move in the book is to notice how they're writing about Britain's 19th century in the very years that Britain's 19th century is being invented as an object of study, as a field, Romanticism, Victorian Studies, Cultural Studies.

It's thinking of them as offering a counterpoint to the story of the 19th century that we tell ourselves, or have been telling ourselves for about 70 years. And the talk one is about Eric Williams; That's the chapter I'm writing now.

And it's kind of striking because he begins his book by saying, *Oh, these British writers, they think that West Indians can't write their history: Here are some examples.* And now we are independent and we're going to write our own history. And what is this book about? It's called *British Historians and the West Indies.* It's about British historiography.

So I'm really interested in how he's thinking decolonization by thinking about 19th century Britain. And the sort of figures that I'm interested in, that he's interested in, are people like EA. Freeman and Lord Acton. And he's really interested in their theorizations, their weird theorizations of race and history and progress and national history.

And the thing I'm really struggling with, the thing I'm terrified to present, is that he keeps summing up what they think with this line by Tennyson, which is "from precedent to precedent." It's an early Tennyson poem, "You Ask Me Why" and it's about the kind of gradualism of English progress.

And so he keeps using Tennyson as a way to capture a certain kind of British national thought.

JP:
Nasser, do you have a tattoo that says, *Hating Tradition Properly*? I feel like you keep coming back to that idea.

NM:
Yeah, I mean, I would tattoo all of *Minima Moralia* all over my body.

JP:
Okay, that's for the next episode of the podcast. That's when we go YouTube for... I would do, Gifts Must Not Be Exchanged. That would be mine.

Okay, this is great. And I will just quickly add, I mean, there's already connections that I want to dive into, but I'll say mine comes out of a study of really the long history of science fiction understood as a satirical genre, which involves tracing a bunch of different affordances or sub-genres within science fiction, what Darkos Suvin calls the novums of science fiction. And the Novum that I want to trace for this paper is how the concept of time travel leaps the gap from the 19th to the 20th century.

And obviously, if we understand time travel in a larger sense, you don't need Genette or Jameson to say that time travel is already part of the literary armamentarium of just ordinary representational realism.

But thinking specifically about that image of the man and the time machine, which is what Wells offers with the chronic Argonauts or the time machine, and what happens to it. And I think my investment, like, Kristin, like you, I want to land in the early 20th century.

My investment is the idea that modernist literature picks it up in ways that it doesn't really acknowledge, so Proust very explicitly calls out the time machine in the opening few pages of *Remembrance of Things Past,* but also Ford Madox Ford wrote a novel in 1901 that was about time travel.

And then he comes back in 1915 and writes *The Good Soldier,* which is not overtly about time travel, but actually it kind of is in the same way that *Slaughterhouse Five* is about time travel. That is, it's about temporal disruption and the absence of seriality.

And you could say, oh yeah, well, that's just kind of a clever modernist move. But I guess my investment is to say, yeah, but genres actually open up possibilities for people to make these connections. So I want to say there's a connection to your mineral and mineral time. And I haven't quite got there yet.

But it's like, if you think about the logic of time travel, there's so much about the expansion of the time scale that you get in the late 19th century when people stop looking at human time and start looking at biological time and beyond biological time, geological time, beyond geological time, you know, sidereal time, that there's something time travel related, adjacent there that I'm also trying to pick out. So that's where I start.

And yeah, I don't know, Kristin, you look like you want to say something. So why don’t you pick this up?

KM:
No, I was just thinking, it was really helpful for me, actually, when I read the way you all were describing what you were thinking about doing for the conference, because I really was in the archive, just kind of encountering the

material for the first time and seeing the way that you were kind of centering these questions of time travel and the way that Nasser was thinking about questions around decolonization and questions of modernity, that you were centering temporality so much really, really got me thinking and thinking about the ways that within this relationship between Annie Besant and J. Krishnamurthi that she was using this very familiar kinship language to think about the question of rebirth, that they actually refer to one another as mother and son, that she was going to be the mother for the son that was going to be this new world teacher that was going to bring about this new possible theosophical future.

But the fact that she was also thinking about that as a relationship, the reason it was so rich and had the possibility for engendering such potential revolutions is because it had existed since the world existed, that they just kept coming back to one another and that they were moving towards the possibility of evolving into this absolutely gorgeous new age that theosophy was promising.

So there was something really, really helpful about being forced to present on this particular panel at a moment that I feel like is before I'm ready to really begin talking about this project and that thinking about the way that you all were conceptualizing temporality as sort of central to your projects, got me to hone in on that component of this material.

And Nasser, I totally want to hear your thought about that idea too, but maybe that is a helpful way of highlighting, maybe, though the three of us are in the room together, there's kind of a fourth presence, which is that the organizers gave us the 20th century as a topic. And that's interesting.

JP:
So Nasser, you've been working on this 20th century question for a while already, so it came easy to you. But for each of us, there is, you know, there's this question of the I don't know, the container shaping your thought, like that is something that I both like and on some level resent about conferences. Because I'm kind of obedient, I kind of an obedient subject, you know, you just give me a keyword and I'm like, okay, must include that keyword and therefore, so, so there's something good there about how you're being shaped towards that, though Nasser may be less for you since you were already thinking about the 20th century.

But there's also potentially something, I don't know, yeah, doesn't Foucault call it capillarity? Like, you know, coercive and yet productively coercive.

NM:
Yeah, like restraints are really generative. We know this at many levels. It's both like productive for us to write these things. But it's also like, you know, Orientalism was a constraint in terms of how you talk about the Orient. And that was immensely productive for 18th, 19th century, 20th century writers, as was decolonization.

And it is has its own kind of constraints. And that is itself productive and generative.

JP:

We are all people who've given a lot of papers over the years, but nonetheless, there's still some anxiety associated with it as well as hard work. So maybe we could talk about what we think we will get out of it, and then that will be entertaining to compare to what actually happened when we presented this panel.

KM:
I mean, I can begin. I think that I am very much, I was saying to this to you before we started that I am very much at a phase with this project where I am at the very, very beginning of it.I am on a sabbatical this year. I have been working in archives for most of the year.

And I think that I am still very much in a phase where I don't know what I think about this material. And it's not just a question of I don't know what my argument is yet. I don't know where I want to position myself ethically in relationship to the kinds of dynamics that I am describing.

Then I think when I began this project, I was thinking a lot about questions of anti-colonial solidarities. But then as I actually started to work with the material, particularly this material that has to do with theosophy, I'm trying to be really attentive to the operations of orientalism that are pulsing beneath all of these different theosophical networks that are being forged across Irish and Indian groups at this particular moment.

And I find myself getting pulled in so many different directions in terms of how I want to cast this when I write about it. There are moments where I feel this kind of sense of consternation. Then there are these moments where I feel this kind of like I was working with the newspaper that Annie Besant was editing, *New India,* and the ways that it was fostering all of this kind of anti-colonial discussion at the moment and finding that so seductive.

So I think I'm still at this phase where I really do not know where my sympathies lie within this narrative. And I feel really, really nervous about talking about this material before I have a sense of where I am actually situating myself in relationship to it. I mean, I think that will be exciting, but I think it's...

I do feel kind of put on the spot talking about this content when I've actually just begun to sort of get my footing in relationship to it.

NM:

This is my concern. The paper is in part about Tennyson.

And I have seen this vision of I give the paper and then Chip Tucker and Cornelia Pearsall raise the hand. And they're like, *you don't know how to read poetry.* (Not that they would ever say those kinds of things) *You don't know how to read poetry and you're super wrong about Tennyson.*

Which is to say, yeah, I don't work on poetry. Just basically barely reading Tennyson now. So I live in fear of that.It's pretty simple.

JP:
Can I just say I love those two responses and I really want to revisit this? Because would you guys both accept that *imposter syndrome* is like a version of that? Like your own, Kristin?

Okay, so here's the thing. I would say Nasser, the thing you're describing of imposter syndrome vis-a-vis, like erudite specialized knowledge is like an old phenomenon that we all know.

Like we individually know it, but also in the field, it is a well-promulgated and

understood phenomenon which we all talk about. We reassure our graduate students about it constantly because they all have it all the time. (Especially first gen students, by the way.) I think that's actually really interesting, that conversation.

But Kristin, what you're describing, and you have to correct me if I'm getting it wrong, you're worried about ethical pushback against your position, your subjectivity, yourself.

KM:
Well, now we know one another's deepest fears.

NM:
Yeah.

KM:
I'm definitely going to ask you a question about Tennyson in the future.

NM:
I have a real problem with how you're characterizing Eric Williams. He was actually..

JP
I'm going to ask you a question in Tennysonian verse form, in the four by four,

KM:
I want you to respond in kind.

But okay, so I'm going to keep going at this because I don't care. I have the bit between my teeth. But the position, it seems to me, Kristin, that second response made so much sense to me because you're talking about problems of judgment and you're talking about the problem of having to be able to come to judgment from only a limited standpoint because all of us are limited innately, and then one is especially limited early on.

It still feels like there's a difference between the question of how we arrive at judgment versus, I don't know, I mean, the word I keep coming back to is like *positionality* or like *stance* or something. I just feel like people are more likely to call out other people's stances than they are each other's judgment.

And judgment seems to me hugely worth debating. Like, it's about the place where generals meet particulars, and we should hash that out. But the stance part is like, I don't know, I just get awfully tired. I just feel like especially people are just worried that they're going to offend somebody because of where they're, yeah, because they haven't ethically…

KM
I'm not as much worried about offending someone.I'm really worried about not doing right by this material. I think that, and part of it has to do with the fact that this is, it's not just that it's a new project, it's a new direction, right? I've been writing about decadence since graduate school. And my first two books are fundamentally preoccupied with that.

And now I decided I wanted to do this project that is about Ireland and about India and about theosophy. All three are things that I do not know enough about to be writing about yet, right? And so, and that's, it's exciting, it's challenging.

That's why I wanted to do it. I wanted to kind of push myself to take on something new. So I think I'm worried about disappointing myself. I'm worried about disappointing the material itself, right? That I'm going to be trying to articulate something about it before I have an actual intimacy with it, right?

And I feel like when I talk about the 1890s, I have such a deep intimacy there. And I feel like those are my actual friends, right? As much as living, breathing people that I interact with on a daily basis. I think the reason I feel happy and energized this year is because I've asked myself to do such a new kind of project.

But it is a project that's going to require twice as long as the last book that I wrote because it's going to require or even more, right? Because it's going to require me to enter into conversation with all these new fields that I do not have training in. And so, yeah, so I think this is self-hatred rather than concern about-

JP:
Yeah, no, no, I get it. That makes a lot of sense. And it also makes me think that like this setting this up as the format of like what the conference will elicit is

like a part of the story. But the other part is, yeah, it goes back to that phrase of like acts of *externalized self-promising*.

Like part of what we're doing is just trying to force ourselves to get into that other conversation, as you said, with like my friends in the 1890s. I agree with that. I do think part of this is about who will be in the room that day. But a lot more of it is about my pushing myself. Yeah, for me, it's Ford Madox Ford. I've always found him fascinating. But I never really knew the whole arc of the career before. And yeah, I want to be true to him.

I want, I don't want to be--Paul Saint Amour has this amazing chapter about Ford. I want to make sure that what I say isn't contradicting anything in there that I have learned from there.

NM:

So that's a great, I totally take that point. John, none of your books is like the last, like you've, like, you sort of like, yeah, your research is always going to new places and things. And so you've been here before. Could you say something just about, like, about what, like, why this feels different from those other projects? Or if it does at all?

JP:

Oh, that's interesting. Like, I always think, I think of mine as having a kind of hook-and-ladder quality: there was this chapter about Edgeworth in *The Crowd* that was really about portable property. There was this chapter about, you know, Hardy and that was really about semi-detachment.

So I see them kind of adjacent to one another. Is that the question, like, how you get to one thing to another?

NM:
Yeah, I guess so, yeah. But, like, you're in, like, in each case, you're in, like, a pretty new archive, or a very different set of, like, categories and concepts.

JP:

I totally get it. So I think that if you want to talk about imposter syndrome, so maybe this is a good place to talk about it, I don't think, I mean, like, reading John Guillory's new book about professing criticism was really helpful. I actually think I'm more like a critic than a scholar.

I would like to be a scholar. My mom says, you know, the Hedgehog and Fox distinction: that the Fox knows many tricks, but the Hedgehog only knows one, but it's a good one. And she said that she feels like her whole career, she was a Fox who was pretending to be a Hedgehog.

And that's what I feel too. I think I'm a critic, not a scholar. I do think I engage with archives, but I do not engage at the depth and seriousness that either of you two does and that lots of people whose work I admire do.

I think I have a more critical engagement. I think doing the B-Side Book really helped me think about that. This is this series I do for public books of just like 1300 word articles about beloved books.

And that helped me realize how much of my investment was critical versus scholarly. Does that make sense in the sense that Guillory distinguishes?

NM:
Yeah.And you feel like that makes it easier to do that move to a new, new kind of thinking or a new set of critical objects.

JP:
Yeah. I really try not to over claim. Ihope I'm not pretending to do scholarship that I'm really not doing. So I don't, it's not like I think I'm faking it. It's just that what I'm doing by nature is I think a little bit more, you know, lateral or rhizomatic or something.

Like in the best case scenario, it helps people make connections rather than being able to show them definitively, this is what happened. Does that make sense?

KM:

I think I'm thinking about that in relationship because I think with this new project, I really will be kind of entering into conversation with Irish Studies, for

example, or the South Asian Studies. I think this question of like whether or not you're, I don't think I'll be showing either of those fields something new about this material, that they're going to know a lot better than I do.

But I think it comes back to what I was saying before, like how does the story read a little bit differently when someone who's trained in the way that I'm trained looks at the material, right?

And so it's not that I'm going to be telling, it's not like I'm going to be telling them information that they don't know, but maybe there's a way that it will get funneled through my mind and my training and my methodologies that might make it read afresh and kind of create the possibility for conversation across these fields, which is what we all keep saying we want to happen, right?

That we want there to be this kind of conversation happening in a way that moves Victorian studies in a more kind of transnational direction. But doing that inspires a lot of anxiety on my part.

JP:

Can I just bring this back to Pamela Fletcher in that book, *The Victorian Painting of Modern Life*? I think one reason I really admire her is that she spent a lot of time taking literary studies accounts of what was going on in narrative really seriously, but filtering it through what she knows very well about Victorian painting.

So there's a, yeah, I mean, it goes back to your point, Kristin, and maybe like we're all dyed in the wool Victorianist even when we're not. I mean, we're like we've had, we've had we have one body of literature like under our command and then we can sort of run that as a filter like you would in a lab.

You know, that's a particular filter that you run things through and then particular things stick to that filter. And I really feel that with Fletcher like that things about narrative and narrating reality that Fletcher notices stick to her filter because she's been looking at paintings in the way she has for so long.

KM:
Yeah, I love that. That's such a hopeful way of thinking about it. Yeah, I think that actually gives a kind of really nice way of trying to conceptualize what I'm

describing.

JP:

OK, do you guys have final words before we enter the tunnel of silence and go give our papers and then come back to talk about them?

NM:

Time travel into the future? We'll come back as Minerals.

KM:

We were Minerals together once.

JP:

I would have come back as the orphan who actually has a father. That seems like a very convenient thing to be.

KM:

No, I'm really grateful that this got me to actually start shaping this material into something, right? Because it is so exciting to me in so many different ways. But the prompt that we received from the conference, along with the kind of prompt I got from the two of you in terms of what you were thinking about doing, really did force me to start actually having a way to describe what was drawing me in to this content. So I'm very appreciative of that.

And now I hope I just don't embarrass myself when we actually talk about it in front of people.

JP:

Yeah, well, the desire not to embarrass ourselves, maybe. I think that's emerged as like the most powerful driver there is in academia. After tenure, I suppose.

OK, so all right, on behalf of Recall This Book, thank you guys so much and see you in a couple of weeks. Recall This Book is the creation of John Plotz and

Elizabeth Ferry. Sound Editing is by Khimaya Bagla and music comes from a song by Eric Chaslow and Barbara Cassidy. We gratefully acknowledge support from Brandeis University and its Mandel Center for the Humanities.

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