

**Thursday, February 28, 2019**

## **Session 1: Introduction: What Can Narrative Mean?**

**Moderator: Stuart Firestein**

**Patrick Colm Hogan**, Board of Trustees Distinguished Professor and Professor of English, University of Connecticut

**Title of Abstract:** What Stories Might Be

There is a range of ways in which we use the words “story” and “narrative.” Stories are, minimally, particular causal sequences, which may be implicit or explicit. The isolation of such sequences relies on processes of selection, organization, inference, and simulation. Upon this foundation, we develop different types of causal trajectories, with different degrees and kinds of constraint. Differences include the centrality of agents and emotions, the manner in which the agents are explained, the extent to which the purposes of the sequence involve manipulating interpersonal stance and fostering simulation by recipients, and the nature and sources of organizational structures (such as genres).

The most narrowly constrained sort of explicit causal sequence is found in the physical sciences. Literary narratives are perhaps the least constrained in their incorporation of cognitive and affective targets and processes. Narratives in the social sciences and areas of practical life (such as politics) fall at various points in between. For instance, the genre structures, empathic aims, and simulative processes of literary stories may be applied to non-literary materials, as when politicians emplot national policy in keeping with heroic, sacrificial, or other cross-cultural prototypes. This last process is highly socially consequential and only one case of many such narrative processes in need of further study.

**Mike Shadlen**, Professor of Neuroscience, Columbia University

**Title of Abstract:** Neuroscience and Narrative: A Rational Brain Trips on its Tale

Studies in the neuroscience of decision-making have brought to light mechanisms that give rise to rational choice behavior. By rational I mean consistent with the laws of probability and optimal, given some desired goal (aka, loss)—in a word, Bayesian. Yet, as Kahneman and Tversky highlighted, humans often decide irrationally. I plan to develop the thesis that this irrationality derives from the use of narrative. Briefly, narrative allows us to deal with complex, multi-dimensional workspaces in ways that are computationally intractable to Bayesian inference. Narrative provides a handle by assigning (or hypothesizing) causes and consequences. It also invites irrationality by confusing joint- with conditional probabilities. Time permitting, I will also share ideas about the neurobiology of narrative itself, as an

example of aesthetic expression. The ideas derive from the view that perception and epistemic state (*gnosis*) are organized as an interrogation. I will contrast this with the view from artificial intelligence, which casts perception and gnosis as the outcome of information processing.

**Rachel Falcone**, Co-Founder of Storyline, a non-profit production company that crafts original stories to make sense of complicated issues, provoke discussion and inspire actions that address society's biggest challenges

**Title of Abstract:** Getting to the Heart of It

Filmmaker and artist Rachel Falcone from Storyline shares more than a decade of experience asking questions through interviewing. How do you get to the heart of it? And how can your approach to asking questions create more than just stories?

## **Session 2: The Role of Narrative in Human Life**

**Moderator: Pamela Smith**

**Marianne Hirsch**, Professor of English and Comparative Literature and Professor of Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, Columbia University

**Title of Abstract:** First Person Theoretical

Why, as scholars, do we turn to the personal? Is the personal anecdote self-indulgent? How does it need to be structured to engage our readers, deepen our questions, anchor our stakes? What are its best uses and most egregious misuses? How does this vary by field, gender, rank, and status? My presentation is meant as a provocation to explore the narrative dimensions of personal scholarship.

**Keith Oatley**, Novelist and Professor Emeritus of Cognitive Psychology, University of Toronto

**Title of Abstract:** Narrative Art in Writers, Readers, and Audiences: Exploration, Emotion, Effects

Whereas writers in science are mainly concerned with the truth of whether observations correspond with explanatory statements, writers of fiction pursue this kind of truth and also truths of two other kinds: of whether a piece of writing coheres within itself and whether it resonates, truthfully, with readers or audience members. A piece of narrative art is a depiction of characters' intentions and the vicissitudes they meet in circumstances that those who engage with it may not have considered. To write in this way, a writer, often prompted by emotions that are not yet understood, must make wide explorations. In fiction

which is art, what is offered does not aim to persuade or instruct, but to invite those who engage with it to take part in parallel explorations in their imagination. Recent empirical results indicate that those who do this come to understand other people better, and are enabled to change within themselves, not as someone else desires but in their own ways.

**Rita Charon**, Professor of Medical Humanities and Ethics and of Medicine at the Columbia University Medical Center and Chair, Department of Medical Humanities and Ethics, Columbia University

**Title of Abstract:** The Chimera of Medical Narrative

Narratives in clinical practice are, at the same time, professionally governed scientific hypothesis-generating/ hypothesis-testing cognitive acts and singular, metaphor-ridden, Wordsworthian “spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings.” At the very same time, the diagnostic discourse (What is the matter?) accompanies the values/meaning discourse (What matters to you?). It diminishes the nature of the clinician-patient conversation to refer to it as story-telling, for the complexity and power of patients’ utterances achieve the status of literary creations if one knows how to read/listen to them. The discipline of narrative medicine attempts to equip the listeners of these narratives with the literary wherewithal to take into account such narrative features of the talk as temporal complexity, spatial description, figural language, allusions, and narratorial strategies. Quite apart from the plot—much less the question of which organ system is ailing here?—these consequential conversations don’t just clarify what the matter is but, in fact, co-create the problem and its potential solutions. That both halves of the chimera must be accomplished during one conversation makes for the risk and the challenge of medical practice.

### **Session 3: The Role of Narrative in Human Life, continued**

**Moderator: Rita Charon**

**Laura Otis**, Professor of English, Emory University

**Title of Abstract:** How Narratives Can Invite Multi-Modal Simulation

This presentation will address the questions “Why do humans create narratives?” and “How can scientists communicate with the public through story-telling?” by offering insights on how skilled fiction-writers use language to cue several sensory modalities at once. Building on the work of interdisciplinary scholars Elaine Scarry and G. Gabrielle Starr, I will offer observations that I have made as a literary scholar, creative writer, and former neuroscientist about how writers can pull readers into stories, making them feel almost as though they are having actual sensory experiences. The aim is to describe creative writers’ intuitive knowledge in a way that will be useful to neuroscientists learning how brains

combine information from different sensory modalities, and to scientists and physicians communicating their work to the public.

**Rishi Goyal**, Assistant Professor of Emergency Medicine and Director of the Medicine, Literature and Society major, Columbia University

**Title of Abstract:** Social Emergency Medicine: An Emerging Response to Societies of Control

Emergency Medicine in contemporary America has been tasked with twin goals and aspirations. On the one hand, we have developed highly sophisticated and scientific approaches to the care of critically ill patients in the early hours of their disease process when they are most vulnerable to death or long term infirmity. But alongside the care of catastrophic illness, emergency departments have become providers of crisis care: care for the critically uninsured or underinsured, care for the homeless, care for the otherwise marginalized patients most affected by the structural determinants of health and least likely to obtain care elsewhere. Social Emergency Medicine emerges as a sub-discipline within Emergency Medicine to highlight our commitments to vulnerable populations, to acknowledge histories of exploitation, and to promote strategies of resistance. Emergency Departments are crucibles of all the upstream determinants of health: changing access to medical insurance, inter-generational poverty, transient homelessness, untreated mental illness, and even uncertain immigration statuses. Social and structural determinants of health cannot be studied without a significant attempt to understand the lived experience of individual patients in their historic and narrative contexts. And health cannot be reduced to the biomedical model. Knowledge about illness and the body is always contextual—it is social, structural, and cultural. We look to the critical medical humanities, an inter-disciplinary and heterogeneous body of knowledge and theory as a prompt to self-reflection and a challenge to normative assumptions about medicine and society.

**Lisa Zunshine**, Bush-Holbrook Professor of English, University of Kentucky

**Title of Abstract:** Departments of Lost and Found Minds

My talk brings together cognitive science and literary studies. Drawing on research in theory of mind, aka mind reading (i.e., our capacity for explaining our own and others' behavior as caused by underlying mental states), I discuss ways in which cultural institutions reward or discourage elaborate attributions of thoughts and feelings to people and events, how this process changes over time, and what forms it takes in fictional narratives.

## **Session 4: Narrating and Visualizing Data**

**Moderator: Eileen Gillooly**

**Suresh Naidu**, Associate Professor of International and Public Affairs and Economics,  
Columbia University

**Title of Abstract:** Causality in Historical Social Science

Empirical economic history is focused on recovering causal relationships from historical data. But history is complex and narratives are required to communicate patterns of empirical results. I will talk about how both qualitative and quantitative historical information is used to curate and communicate patterns of causal results in economic history.

**John Tresch**, Mellon Professor in Art History, History of Science and Folk Practice,  
Warburg Institute, University of London

**Title of Abstract:** "The Universe Is a Plot of God": Cosmological Narrative in Antebellum US  
Science and Culture

Edgar Allan Poe's 1848 "poem in prose," *Eureka*, explained the creation and aim of the universe in both scientific and aesthetic terms. It's a very strange little book, as challenging for literary scholars as for historians of science. To make sense of what Poe was up to requires us to get a handle on the leading narratives of creation, natural order, scientific progress and national destiny that were in play in the US in the 1830s and 40s. Reframed within the chaotic media regime of early print culture, a teetering regime of natural theology, Humboldtian environmental determinism, transcendentalism, religious revival and enthusiastic reform movements, Poe's puzzling book begins to look surprisingly sane; more generally, it sheds light on the role popular cosmological narratives play in both challenging and legitimating the sciences in modern societies.

**Niall Bolger**, Professor of Psychology, Columbia University

**Title of Abstract:** The Role of Narrative In Empirical Reports in the Natural Sciences

All scientists know that successful empirical reports must involve storytelling. They must provide a resolution to an unfinished story, add an interesting twist to an existing story, tell a new story about existing findings, or begin a story and invite others to add to the plotline. These aspects of storytelling can enable scientific results to be communicated effectively, but they can also distort or even subvert a scientists' attempts to accurately portray their work. I will provide several examples from psychological research to illustrate these ideas.

**Laura Kurgan**, Associate Professor of Architecture, Planning, and Preservation and Director of the Visual Studies Sequence in the Faculty of Architecture, Planning, and Preservation; Columbia University

**Title of Abstract:** In Plain Sight

In Plain Sight presents anomalies in population distribution seen in nighttime satellite imagery of Earth and census grid counts produced by governments worldwide — revealing places with bright lights and no people and places with people and no lights—thus, challenging our assumptions about geographies of belonging and exclusion. The immersive installation using maps as its primary medium of communication and storytelling interrogates the relationship between citizenship and the built environment at the scale of the globe, where the primacy of the individual, the city, and even the nation drops away and is replaced by data: electricity, trade routes, migratory shifts, and the flow of capital, goods and people. This work was conceived and designed for Dimensions of Citizenship, the US Pavilion at the 16th International Architecture Exhibition of La Biennale di Venezia, commissioned by the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and The University of Chicago. See <http://c4sr.columbia.edu/projects/plain-sight> for more detail.

### **Keynote Lecture**

**Lawrence Weschler**, Author and Journalist

**Title of Abstract:** Narrative, Register, and Credibility: The Case of Oliver Sacks

It's worth remembering that back in 1974, when *Awakenings*, the book that would come to be seen as Oliver Sacks's foundational masterpiece, was first published, it was roundly dismissed by most of his colleagues in the medical community, to the extent that it was even acknowledged it at all. Neither double-blinded nor control-grouped and certainly not peer reviewed, utterly lacking in experimental protocols and quantitative tracking, it seemed to go against every tenet of the way science, and particularly medicine, had come to be being conducted in those years, and to a large extent, it simply wasn't believed. On the other hand, Sacks, whose interest wasn't so much in the disease the patient had as in the patient who had the disease, and who had taken to describing himself as a clinical ontologist (a doctor whose principal diagnostic question had come to be "How are you?" which is to say, "How do you be?"), those sorts of research and reporting requirements completely missed the point, which was the phenomenological experience of the individual patient (especially in the case of patients entranced in the sorts of extremity he was encountering in his practice). To track their histories, he insisted on reverting to (and almost single handedly reviving) an earlier tradition, that of the case history. Still, that gambit, the recourse to narrative as such, stirred up all sorts of contentious problems of its

own (for starters, how to evaluate the credibility, the reliability of the report in question), and such concerns will form the basis of this talk by longtime New Yorker veteran Lawrence Weschler, whose thirty-five year friendship with and tracking of Sacks himself will be forming the basis for his forthcoming biographical memoir, *And How Are You, Doctor Sacks?* (due out from Farrar Straus this coming August).

**Friday, March 1, 2019**

## **Session 5: Formative Narratives**

**Moderator: Marwa Elshakry**

[\*\*Harriet Ritvo\*\*](#), Arthur J. Conner Professor of History, Massachusetts Institute of Technology

**Title of Abstract:** Narrative and Evolution

Narrative accounts often provided the evidence that supported 19th-century scientific arguments, as well as the basis for subsequent historical interpretations. My talk will explore the way that Darwin reworked his narrative account of his visit to the Galapagos in *The Voyage of the Beagle* for the argument of *On the Origin of Species*, and look briefly at the way that contemporary historians of science have integrated Darwin's narrative into their work.

[\*\*Nasser Zakariya\*\*](#), Assistant Professor of Rhetoric, University of California, Berkeley

**Title of Abstract:** Story Before Language: Narratological Debates and Natural History

"It appears, then, that there are very few instances in which we can sustain the notion of a set and sequence of events altogether prior to and independent of the discourse through which they are narrated." Barbara Herrnstein Smith came to this conclusion in 1980, in a debate over structuralist narratologies. This talk will briefly look to the implications of Smith's claims, and the positions of those she countered, for contemporary scientific histories of the world. To paraphrase Smith, can the history of the world, or universal history, sustain the notion of a set and sequence of events prior to and independent of specific discourses? Does the coherence of that history rely on such priority or independence? Conversely, what pressure, if any, does the assertion of a universal story place on understandings of narrative.

[\*\*Maeve Glass\*\*](#), Associate Professor of Law, Columbia Law School

**Title of Abstract:** Constitutional Narratives

For well over a century, historians of America's Constitution have worked within a familiar set of narrative elements, drawing upon a relatively stable plot line, setting, and set of characters. In this paper, I will explore how and why these narrative elements first took root in the field of American constitutional history, before examining why and at what cost they have become the default starting point for historical analysis today. By illuminating and critiquing the origins and evolution of these elements, this paper thus offers a case study of the role of narrative in the field of American constitutional history.

## **Session 6: Narrative, Fiction, and Truth**

**Moderator: Matteo Farinella**

[\*\*Arden Hegele\*\*](#), Fellow, Society of Fellows in the Humanities, Columbia University

**Title of Abstract:** Medical Wonders and the Romantic Novel

In the eighteenth century, medical accounts of miraculous phenomena abounded—from Mary Toft's claim in 1726 that she had given birth to seventeen rabbits, to the cases of 'Fasting Girls' during the Romantic turn at century's end. Despite their validation by scientific and medical experts, these miracles ultimately proved fraudulent—and yet, their expert testimonies offered a model of narration that would be deeply influential upon the novel, a genre then gaining in prestige. Ultimately, I hope to offer not just a brief history of medical fraud and expert witnessing, but also a new reading of the surprising ramifications of fraud on Romanticism's most important novel: Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818).

[\*\*Kendall Thomas\*\*](#), Nash Professor of Law and Director of the Center for the Study of Law and Culture, Columbia University

**Title of Abstract:** Marrying the State: Narrativity and Nationality in Obergefell v. Hodges

The paper discusses the role narrative played in the 2015 U.S. Supreme Court decision that recognized the constitutional right of same sex couples to civil marriage. I offer a close reading of the Opinion of the Court, focusing on the story Justice Anthony Kennedy tells about how and why civil marriage is not only, nor even principally, a private contract between the marital couple, but a public relationship in which the modern "conjugal state" actively participates and becomes a partner in the intimate associations it purports merely to license. The Court's decision will also offer an opportunity for theoretical reflection on the asserted distinctions between "law" and "fact" and more broadly between "analytic" and "narrative" discourse.

[\*\*Nick Lemann\*\*](#), Joseph Pulitzer II and Edith Pulitzer Moore Professor of Journalism and Dean Emeritus, Columbia School of Journalism

**Title of Abstract:** Can Narrative and Truth Coexist?

Journalism is a field where "storytelling" is a core value and there isn't much awareness of what the perils of narrative might be. A very small and new part of journalism is dedicated to being more epistemologically rigorous. Is there a way to marry analytic discipline with the journalistic tradition?

**Stephanie Dinkins**, Transdisciplinary artist interested in creating platforms for ongoing dialog about artificial intelligence as it intersects race, gender, aging, and our future histories

**Title of Abstract:** Narrative, Bias, and AI

What does it look like to create artificially intelligent systems designed to hold and tell the stories of communities of color? Artist Stephanie Dinkins discusses her efforts to create Not The Only One (NTOO), the multigenerational memoir of her black American family told from the mind of an artificial intelligence of evolving intellect. NTOO is an iterative project that strives to create a new kind of artificially intelligent narrative form. It uses oral history and creative storytelling methods, such as interactivity and verbal ingenuity to spark the imagination and transfer knowledge. The project aims to be an eternal archive of evolving stories and wisdom born out of narrative histories, written documents and the many particularities of human culture that sustain, inform and advise. Like the coveted bible that holds family milestones, i.e., birth dates, death dates, and accomplishments, for all those born into a family, this AI will be a dynamic archive of the information, ideas and beliefs the family hands down through the generations. More broadly, Dinkins' work looks at the possibility of an AI mediates community archive and what it means to be human through and alongside our AI technologies.

**Session 7: Storytelling**  
**Moderator: Rachel Ginsberg**

**Ben Lillie**, Co-founder of Caveat, Co-founder of the Story Collider, Physicist

**Title of Abstract:** The Hard Problem of Science and Storytelling

In many, if not most, parts of our cultural conversations it is essential to cast issues and concepts in the form of narratives if we want them to gain traction. Stories are incredibly powerful both for creating memorable situations and events and in building emotional connections to people and concepts. However, many of the most important issues surrounding science, such as climate, have no characters, no plot, and no direct causality,

all crucial components of a strong story. This leads to "The Hard Problem of Science and Storytelling": how do you tell a compelling narrative about a diffuse statistical phenomenon? This talk will pose, and by no means answer, that question.

**Matteo Farinella**, Presidential Scholar in Society and Neuroscience, Columbia University

**Title of Abstract:** Science Storytelling in Comics

Combining storytelling, humor and the clarity of visual communication, comics can be a powerful tool to present science and engage readers of all ages, across linguistic and cultural barriers. However, the emerging field of graphic science still lacks recognition, and most science cartoonists produce their work outside of traditional institutions, without any clear frameworks or guidelines. Using popular examples from the field, this talk will explore how the visual language of comics can be successfully applied to science communication, the ideal balance between facts and fiction, as well as how characters and metaphors can be used to communicate complex ideas.

**Amir Baradaran**, New York based Iranian-Canadian performance and new media artist. His pioneering Augmented Reality {AR}t works question the role of machines and the promise of Artificial Intelligence in our everyday life.

**Title of Abstract:** Animated Politics: De-Colonising Immersive Spaces

How can we define the role of the machine and that of its creators in deciphering, mimicking and creating sets of moral codes that define our sense of (digital) selves in relation to the (augmented and mediated) spaces we occupy and the bodies we inhabit and encounter. This process requires us to co-create by allowing for input from our machines as well as our audiences. How such these practices change our sense of ethics and our ability to understand how experiences of gendered, racialized and socioeconomic identities are transformed through these new mediums? This presentation reflects on my own practice (our practices if we go with a panel) of making immersive experiences.