

Dale Keiger: We all know what history is. It's the story of our past. Well, yes and no. The formal practice of history is the study of documentary evidence to figure out how we lived 50 or 500 or 5,000 years ago. Taking that knowledge and creating a story out of it, especially a narrative, is a powerful path to understanding but not without pitfalls, and that's what we'll be talking about today on the Known World, the podcast from Johns Hopkins magazine that explores what we know, how we know it, and who says.

Dale Keiger: I'm Dale Keiger the editor of the magazine and I'm speaking today with Nathan Connolly, the Herbert Baxter Adams associate professor of history in Johns Hopkins Krieger School of Arts and Sciences. He studies and writes about racism, capitalism, politics, and the built environment and especially the intersection and often as not the collision, of property rights and civil rights. And he's one of a quartet of historians who cohost Back Story, an excellent podcast produced by Virginia Humanities.

Dale Keiger: Nathan, welcome to The Known World, which sounds a little funny now that I've said it. There are many ways to organize historical information, organizing documented history as story, especially narrative story is one. What's gained by that approach?

Nathan Connolly: So I think it's really important to give people who are reading historical work, grounding in some way, so narrative is partly a way of making sure that characters are living, they're breathing, that readers can see where the events are unfolding and how they're unfolding. The thing about narrative is that we talk in narratives all the time, even if we're not entirely sure that we're doing so. And so it really ends up falling on scholars who are working through archives to stitch together enough information to be able to tell a story and to touch the story that most people have in their heads in one way or another about whatever event they might choose to take as a topic.

Dale Keiger: Okay, but now is there a risk for the historian of distorting historical truth than the act of making a narrative because that's a creative act?

Nathan Connolly: Well, yeah, absolutely. I mean, I think one of the things that's most hazardous about doing history and writing these narratives is that you have to make choices. That comes with the territory. And so the question becomes what justifies the selections and the choices that you're making.

Nathan Connolly: There's a really important book, written actually by an anthropologist called *Silencing the Past: Power and the production of History*, and it's written by a man named Michel-Rolph Trouillot, who in fact was an anthropologist here at Hopkins when he wrote that book. And what he talks about is the need to be very mindful of the fact that power enters at every stage of the process of writing historical narrative. It enters when you do archival work and decide what's going to be in the archive for historians to find. It happens when you encounter the documents and bring your own suppositions, and then of course

once you stitch together these fragments and create a story, you actually have to shave away alternative narratives and approaches.

Nathan Connolly: There's a way in which we assume that the story will make itself evident just by virtue of what's in the document. But again, the story was already there in our own mind when we're coming to the material and so we make a selection about what we're going to include and not include and so that's where I think the responsibility of the scholar really steps front and center is that you have to really be aware of what interests are advanced or furthered and what interests are hindered in the choices that you make as a scholar and remembering always that you can't really achieve objectivity. We're human beings.

Nathan Connolly: We have our own sense of our own past and I think it's a false sense of security to think that we're achieving objectivity through a distance from the files, from the archive. What we can achieve its accuracy, and that's a very important difference, that you can tell the most accurate story as possible through rigorous engagement with the sources taking in alternative voices, balancing various accounts, what they call triangulating, taking different takes on a given event.

Nathan Connolly: That's how you get to a more accurate story.

Dale Keiger: And it makes it sound like it's really incumbent on a professional historian to understand his or her own subjectivity in approaching the documentary evidence.

Nathan Connolly: Absolutely. I mean, the way in which you as an intellectual are developing through K through 12 education, through stories told around the dinner table, through school yard conversations and even professional narratives, all of that is going to go into the soup, as it were, when you're writing historical work. And so in some ways being very intentional about your choices is really the best you can hope for.

Nathan Connolly: There are a lot of ways in which we make selections and we're unaware of why we're making those choices or placing certain emphases on say, presidents and their utterances versus the janitors working in the White House, for example. Right? But if you are very clear about what I'm after is the way in which say, you know, Franklin Roosevelt developed the policies of the New Deal with an eye toward workers in the White House. That's a very different kind of approach. Right?

Nathan Connolly: And so all historians are making some kind of analysis about what they're going to include or not, but not everybody who makes those choices is really fully aware as to why they're making those choices.

Dale Keiger: A fortunate thing happened for me yesterday. I just happened to be reading *The New York Times Book Review* and Margaret McMillan has a review of a new

book by Timothy Snyder. And in the review she said this: "So many of us no longer care as we should about understanding ourselves and our past as complex and ambiguous. Rather, we look for comforting stories that claim to explain where we came from and where we're going. Such stories relieve us of the need to think and serve to create powerful identities. They also serve the authoritarian leader who rides them to power."

- Dale Keiger: What can you say about the power of narrative to create tribal myths and nationalistic myths and the harm that can arise from that?
- Nathan Connolly: Yeah. So every group of people has a set of stories and origin story of sorts. So whether you're talking about, you know, people who are indigenous who might have a story about their people beginning on the back of a turtle or Americans who believe that no, we began at Plymouth Rock for instance, instead of say, the Virginia colonies with, you know, the starting of slavery. There are all of these ideas about where people as a group come from.
- Nathan Connolly: And I think it's again important to keep in mind that whether or not you're fully aware of the story and all the contours of it, that we are inheriting these accounts and in the United States, we have a number of these really powerful myths or narratives. I mean one of them for instance, you know, can be captured by Abraham Lincoln and the Gettysburg Address where it talks about, you know, four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth upon this continent, a new nation conceived in liberty. And at the time of the Gettysburg Address in 1863 that 'conceived in liberty' part is really critical for getting listeners to understand why they're fighting the American Civil War. What the importance is of the civil war with slavery, but that is in fact a false account about the origins of the conceptions of America, right?
- Nathan Connolly: If you look at a work like Edmund Morgan's *American Slavery, American Freedom*, it's actually quite clear that in the 17th century, America as a democracy and as a way of being free, being an American was conceptualized in direct counter-distinction to the bonded people in the Virginia Colony. That to be free meant to not be a slave. Right? So the consumption of the American was a counterpoint to the bondage that was being advanced in the Virginia colony in the 17th and early 18th century.
- Nathan Connolly: So again, I think it's important to note that for Americans in general, that idea that the country is based on liberty is different than what many Americans also think oftentimes of color, that the country's origins are based in slavery. And that ends up being a point of contestation and not just in a formal history circles among academics, but also in the streets.
- Nathan Connolly: When you think about protests against police brutality, when you think about people who are concerned about rights at the ballot box, property rights, these kinds of debates that are very grassroots and very everyday are oftentimes steeped in these very old and well developed historical narratives.

Dale Keiger: Now you've got a couple of projects in the works. One of them has a working title of Four Daughters. As I understand it, you plan to write a quartet of biographies and use those for a historical analysis. Can you talk a little bit about that project and talk about that as an example of using story, serving a deeper purpose for you?

Nathan Connolly: Absolutely. So, so Four Daughters is an attempt to try to make sense of the Atlantic world, which includes, in my case, Europe, includes North America and includes the Caribbean. There's another corner of that which is Africa, which my particular subjects don't bump into necessarily.

Nathan Connolly: But for me, Four Daughters is meant to capture these four corners of the Atlantic world that I focus on, which is the Caribbean, England and France, the urban north and the suburban south in the United States. And it's partly an effort to rewrite a grand narrative of the United States from the perspective of working class immigrants and immigrants' children.

Nathan Connolly: And it helps to have as a character or a group of characters, a hook. And in this case, it ends up being my mother and her three sisters as an anchor for the project. So my mom and her sisters were born at various spots in this family migration. So her parents were born in the Caribbean. My mother and her first sister were born in England. Two other sisters were born in New England and specifically in Connecticut, where I was actually born. And then the family in whole moved down to the south, in Florida, in particular.

Nathan Connolly: And so part of it is about understanding what makes that migration acceptable, desirable, possible. But then also recognizing that that family, even those two generations are actually indebted to three and four generations earlier narratives about what does it mean to live under the British empire. What does it mean to be in the United States? What does it mean to travel these great distances by ship? All of this is part of what I call an intergenerational learning and so it's on the one hand a history book about a given point in time, but it's also about how the characters in the story are also thinking historically, how they're also telling stories, how there are narratives that they're drawing from.

Nathan Connolly: And I think it's the way, for me at least, to best understand the duality of the larger narrative and then people's narratives within that narrative ... that is the best thing that can come out of a family history project, for instance.

Dale Keiger: So it sounds like in part it's storytelling not just to make something new, understandable for readers and people who had studied the book, but a process of making it understandable for you.

Nathan Connolly: In a way. I mean, I think part of what is always a challenge facing a historian, regardless of whatever they're studying, is to take something that is extraordinarily complex, that is oftentimes quite specific, oftentimes grounded

in time and place, and to try to bring it into the realm of universal themes and processes and struggles.

Nathan Connolly: So in this case, you know, for instance, to tell a story of great presidents or to tell the story of the westward expansion of the American people is in part of a very specific story that we then use to talk about the country as a whole. My argument is that you can do something quite similar with working class people, Caribbean migrants, women of color, and look at, you know, one: the way that families tell stories.

Nathan Connolly: That's a universal process that people are engaged in. The way that people oftentimes migrate to opportunity, the way they understand themselves relative to formal government structures, the way in which in fact many parents place pressures on their children as a kind of investment to help hopefully move the family lineage, move the family stake, move the family property further along than maybe an earlier generation had been able to do.

Nathan Connolly: And so that's for me, the most important thing is to try to find obviously some sense of groundedness relative to my own story, but far beyond a kind of vanity project to really be able to extend a question about what kinds of stories can really be universal and offer universal meditations on things that really do affect everybody.

Dale Keiger: Okay. Go down a slightly different path here for a moment. You really recently wrote about the film Black Panther. In the essay that you wrote, you said that it taps a 500 year old real history of descendants of Africa imagining freedom and national autonomy in this case, in the creation of an imagined historical narrative.

Dale Keiger: And it just made me curious. Do you think the film is in some ways an important piece of history as story, albeit invented story and to an extent invented history?

Nathan Connolly: Yeah, I mean, I think the Black Panther phenomenon as a cultural happening captures exactly the kind of thing I'm trying to achieve in Four Daughters, right? Which is you have a film about a fictional African kingdom, that is set sometime in the future. So it's a nondescript time and an unknowable place. And yet American audiences, really global audiences have responded so powerfully because of, again, the themes that the film really does tap into, right?

Nathan Connolly: Themes about parenthood, themes about a possibility ... international connection. All of this is a critical piece of the film success and even being, even being able to imagine a future that includes people of color in a way that's not mired in the history of slavery, but mired in a different set of hopes and dreams about whatever the future might hold.

Nathan Connolly: I mean, all of that I think is really important to acknowledge and grapple with. So in the piece that I wrote for the Hollywood Reporter, it was important for me to help readers understand that the audience response to Black Panther was not about fan boys and girls who had been curled up with the comic book for the last 25 or 30 years, but instead it was about people for whom the Black Panther resonated at a deeper level of 500 year old debates about self determination, about a world outside of white supremacy and slavery and colonialism.

Nathan Connolly: And they saw in the imagery of the Black Panther something that spoke to them well and beyond the specifics of the comic per se. And that I think is part of what historians can really help with. You know, regardless of what the topic is, even when you're dealing with a work of fiction, that fiction is tethered in something that speaks to people historically.

Dale Keiger: Yes.

Nathan Connolly: So Toni Morrison obviously is one among many people who have taken a great deal of care to try and connect fictional accounts to deeper historical questions. Dan Brown, who wrote The Da Vinci Code, again, a fictional account, but a sensation nonetheless. Because again, he's able to tap into people's perceptions of what the Renaissance or the Enlightenment might be. Right, and so I think the best novelist, even the ones who write science fiction, you know, the guy who wrote Dune, Frank Herbert, again, there's a kind of messianic message in the characters in that science fiction novel that taps into people's historical understandings of the Bible and Revelation and so forth. Right? Which is again, a piece of literature.

Nathan Connolly: So, so that, that duality of a fictional piece that evokes the historical moment, the historical self. In fact, to me that is what the best history and literature in fact have in common.

Nathan Connolly: It's no less to say that the historical enterprise writing a narrative is creative. It's rigorous. It's based on research in the same way that writing a really well informed piece of fiction is creative and informed by deep research and work. And for me, I take a great deal of comfort in the fact that regardless of whether or not I'm writing fiction or nonfiction, I belong to a community of writers who are grappling with the same basic struggles and questions and burdens of being both creative and thorough.

Dale Keiger: And in a recent episode of Back Story, you said something that struck me. It was this: "It has to ring true in your ear for you to believe it." What did you mean by that?

Nathan Connolly: So to go back to an earlier point, I think there is a fundamental difference, again, between a truth and accuracy. And you can teach graduate students all day long to be accurate, to document, to use footnotes.

Nathan Connolly: That's one step in the process and the evolution of a writer: to be accurate. And it's an important early step. A bigger, deeper step connects back to the point I made earlier about connecting to some kind of universal themes or a kind of truth that human beings can recognize, even if they're not necessarily aware or fully knowledgeable of all the specifics on the ground.

Nathan Connolly: So when you have a story or a conflict between two people and you're trying to capture those dynamics, there was a way in which that fight can seem, you know, "fake," right? Or I think even about my experience, with podcasting, you know, there's a way in which, you know, sometimes when we had to do retakes, especially early in my time on Back Story, and somebody gave a joke, and there would be a spontaneous laugh among the folks in the booths and then we would have to somehow do a retake and try to retell the joke and then try to laugh.

Nathan Connolly: A canned laugh on top of what was just said? That's not a true bit of humor.

Dale Keiger: I was going to say, how'd that go?

Nathan Connolly: They never came out great. I mean they, they totally sounded canned. And again, those are extraordinarily rare moments. But it was to me a very clear example of, you know, a true story ... is a story that hits you at that deeper level. It resonates with you in a way that just feels honest.

Nathan Connolly: And again, I think the most masterful scholars and most masterful writers or who are doing either creative or historical writing, they're able to make a story feel true regardless of whether or not the events on the page actually happens. So for the historian, they have to happen. For the fiction writer, not necessarily so and so to me, I think both of them have to meet at this place where whatever it is they're writing, needs to feel true.

Nathan Connolly: It needs to hit a deeper narrative, people's deeper sense of how communities work, how people operate and think, again, how families work, how you know, these old primordial conflicts, you know, man versus man, man versus nature of that kind of stuff. If it conjures those conflicts in a real way that is evocative, that to me then is a true story.

Dale Keiger: Well, in an important part of convincing someone of something is getting done to the point where they feel like, you know, that's not the way I've always understood it or that's not the way I always heard it or that's ... I don't There are aspects of that that make me uncomfortable, don't appeal to me, but I guess it sounds right.

Nathan Connolly: Yeah.

Dale Keiger: Feels right.

Nathan Connolly: That's right. And you raise a really powerful point, Dale, about the persuasive power of writing because I think there are deep fissures in this country, especially now even around the world, ideologically about any number of things, right? Pick your topic.

Nathan Connolly: And yet I think if there's any potential at all for bringing people together, it has to do with tapping bigger capital T truths, right? Bigger senses of what binds people together, whether it's the desire to build a home or to start a family or you know, to try to make one's way in the world.

Nathan Connolly: And if you can write stories that humanize people and that show that regardless of what a given divide might be that people are basically after very similar things, security, safety, you know, what have you, that that allows you to then reach people and, and be persuasive. I think the best kinds of work are those works ... and again, they're rare, that really do take audiences and in some cases by the throat and say, "You know what, you thought this about X, but it's actually Y. And now come with me as I show you how this is going to unfold in ways that maybe you didn't expect, but that you totally needed to hear and read about."

Dale Keiger: Well, Nathan, thank you so much for coming in to chat with us. It's always a pleasure to speak with you.

Nathan Connolly: Thank you, Dale. Appreciate it.

Dale Keiger: This has been the Known World, produced in the studios of the Johns Hopkins University Department of Communications. The podcast is available on the website of Johns Hopkins magazine, along with every issue of the magazine going back to 1995. It's a trove of science, intellectual and Fine Arts Journalism at Magazine.jhu.edu, our audio producer is Dave Schmelik. I'm Dale Keiger, and thank you for listening. Please join us next time for more of the Known World.