History and Fiction: Narratives, Contexts, and Imaginations

By Jane Dailey, Ghenwa Hayek, Paola Iovene, Ada Palmer, David Perry

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Jane Dailey: I would like to first introduce our panel. Professor Ada Palmer has published two science fiction novels. The most recent one is *Too Like the Lightning*, which was listed in *Scientific American*'s picks for new science fictions. Professor Palmer specializes in Early Modern Europe and the Renaissance, cultural and intellectual history, as well as the history of the book and printing. She specializes in the 'isms': humanism, atheism, deism, epicureanism, animism, stoicism, skepticism, Platonism and Neo-Platonism. And in between she finds time to write novels.

One of the great things about introducing this panel is that I get to meet colleagues that I didn't know I had, and one of them is Paola Iovene. She is an Associate Professor in East Asian Languages and Civilizations and the College, and she studies Chinese literature and film with a focus on the mutual influence of history and literary production. And your new project, which I found particularly interesting, is called the 'Politics and Poetics of Air': you are trying to talk about the cultural history of climate modification in China with a conceptualization of weather as a lens through which to read literature. I find that very confusing and would like to know more about it.

Our next panelist is Ghenwa Hayek, who is Assistant Professor of Modern Arabic Literature. She studies Arab society and literature with a special interest in relationships among cultural production, space and identity formation. I know that your first book focused on Lebanon, and it sounds like your second project also has some focus on Lebanon. She is also a translator. Her work has appeared in literary magazines, the *New York Times*.

Our final panelist in terms of introductions is David Perry, who is Professor of History at Dominican University, which is a neighbor to us and we are glad to welcome you to the University of Chicago. He is a scholar of Medieval Mediterranean History, a journalist and a cultural critic, and he blew me away a minute ago when he said he's written about 200 pieces of editorials, interventions in the public sphere in the last few years, which I think is really important. And I think for all of you who are not planning to go on to become professional historians, your training and your knowledge can be put to good use if you do things like this. When he is not doing things to help all of us, he is addressing the relationship between the Venetian merchant republic and the larger world of intellectual and mercantile exchange in which Venetians took part, and that was his first book product. One of the things that I think make you a good choice for this panel is that you talk about how Venetians tried to make sense of their world through what you say are constantly evolving processes of narrative myth-making, in other words the stories they told to themselves about themselves through time.

This panel is sponsored, finally, by the *Chicago Journal of History*. We are all very proud of our *Chicago Journal of History*, if you stop by the History Department, you will find several boxes of the publications. This is their latest journal produced by all of you, written by all you, and pride-producing for all of us. So, with that, I'm going to sit down and let the panelists take it away.

Paola Iovene: Thanks very much to the organizers for putting a panel around this very fascinating topic. Some of my graduate students have been very interested in this topic, and they had a certain workshop a couple of years ago, in which each of them debated, and though it was more generally about the relationship between literature and history, it has some similarities with this one. And it is also great to see all of you and it is also great to meet my colleagues. And I think there are interesting aspects in common, interesting commonalities among us, and none of us will be able to speak to each of these commonalities but I hope we can discuss them later. For instance, I am most interested in science fiction and I have written about science fiction, though I won't talk about it today.

So, I will start: history and fiction are so mutually entangled and often difficult to keep apart. Engaging with a text, be it a fictional narrative or a historical document means to make sense of it, and to provide an interpretation, which involved reading the text closely, situating it in a context, reconstructing the world in which the text emerged and circulated, and understanding the role that this text played

in that world., ideally, the role that its authors wanted it to have, or hoped it would play and the role that it played. So, both literary scholars and historians have to go through these steps, and in this respect the tools and the approaches partially overlap. Now writing a paper for your history class, writing a thesis in comparative literature or writing a novel of course aren't the same thing, but there are more commonalities than you might imagine. Writing a history of course means crafting a narrative. Historical events, as we know, can significantly change, depending on who is telling it, why, and how. And even those of us who do not write history, and do not write novels are confronted with the question: what story do we want to tell? Some may claim that they found the story in the archive or in the materials, but as a matter of fact the story isn't something you find readymade. Of course, as a scholar of Chinese literature and film I differentiate between history and fiction, so I call history the conditions that enable the creation of certain fictions. In turn, I assume that these fictions partly reflect, and exceed, their historical conditions, in the sense that they offer inventive, surprising, unexpected responses to the problems of their age. But this is too simplistic. Indeed, how do we go about identifying the conditions that really matter? In my field, scholars have tended to focus on concepts of China and 'Chinese-ness' as the main condition shaping Chinese literary writing. So, the questions they ask are such as: How did the rise of China as a nation-state and its ascendance as a global power shape its literary writing? Or they also ask: What's Chinese about certain literary forms? Meanwhile, especially in the last three decades, scholars have criticized any fixed notion of 'Chinese-ness,' pointing out that 'Chinese-ness' itself is an artificial construct that suppresses the variety of languages and ethnicities that thrive both within and outside the boundaries of China proper. As for me, I have not been very interested in the problem of China and 'Chinese-ness.' I have been more interested in investigating the historical nature of the practice of fiction itself. This means at least two things: first to examine how different actors, writers, editors, readers, the texts themselves have redefined what fiction is and what it should do, and second, to explore how fact and fiction blend within specific works. Lately I have enjoyed studying texts in which facts play an important role and in which the line between historical document and fictional invention is blurred. Such works are often called 'reportage literature,' or literature of facts, and they are based on first hand observation of contemporary events. They sway between fiction and documentary, literature and journalism and put any preconceived notion of what literature is under question. In other words, they redefine, so-to-speak, the boundary of fiction and more in general, that of what is literary. About these texts, I found two things quite fascinating. First, how the authors conveyed what I call their 'poetic self-presence' which is to say, the experience of being on the scene, the experience of being there. And second, I'm drawn to the ways in which these texts re-define the boundaries of literature or fiction, a process that involved the re-enactment of one of the paradoxes of the literary, and this gets a little abstract here. I am trying now to articulate this idea so I welcome any question about things that may be a bit unclear.

So, I talk about the paradoxes of the literary, or the paradoxes of literature. One of these paradoxes is a tension between two beliefs. On the one hand, the belief that literature is special, that it can achieve things that other forms of human communication cannot. On the other hand, the belief that in order to achieve its goals, literature has always to become something other than what it is, something less special, something for instance closer to the spoken language, closer to everyday life, or closer to reality. So, studying 'reportage literature' means in some ways to study how it maintains is special status as literature but disavowing it, and by claiming commonalities with non-literary or with, we could say, historical phenomena. I want to give an example, which may help you understand what I mean. These days I am studying a collection of writings tilted *One Day in Shanghai*, which was published in 1939. In 1939, China was at war; it had been at war with Japan since 1931 but hostilities greatly intensified in the summer of '37 and from August 13th to late October 1937, Shanghai became the main battleground. In order to bear witness to the war, some journalists at the Shanghai newspaper issued a call for contributions in which they called for common people to describe one day of their life during the past year. They received 2,000 essays written by people from all walks of life and in the end about two-thirds of these essays made it into the volume, *One Day in Shanghai*, which was issued in 1939. This was not the first text that was describing one day of life in the lives of the common people. There had been two other precedents, one is *One Day in China*, edited by Mao Dun, and published in 1936, and the other was One *Day in the World*, edited by Maxim Gorky and published in Moscow in 1937. Actually, similar experiments in the literature of fact and mass observation had been taking place in different parts of Europe and the Soviet Union till the late 1920s. These experiments reflected efforts to create a mass literature written by and for the people. So, the idea was that literature ought to offer detailed accounts of the lives of ordinary people in order to convey the social inequalities, the conservative beliefs and the structures that shaped them, and thus contribute to social change. So, the question as to whether *One Day in Shanghai* is a fictional work or a historical document, in a way it is both. Historians of war-time Shanghai and war-time China may mine the text for information on how the violence of the war affected the lives of ordinary people; as a literary scholar, however, I'm more interested in exploring the entanglements

between the global discourses on the goals of literature, the material and institutional factors, and local factors that made these texts possible in the first place. So, the questions that matter most to me are: how did the war blur the boundaries between journalism and literature? And how did it transform the revolutionary nature of collectively compiled texts that shadowed fact and fiction? Noting then that some of the contributions in the texts are written by professional writers and journalists but many more are written by students, clerks, shop-keepers, dancers and so on. I also ask, how much genius in these voices, do they project a unified front of resistance against Japan? I want to conclude with two points. At this moment of alternative facts, I want to justify the importance of facts and in some way to have a broader discussion on what constitutes the fact in our respective disciplines? And my second point is about fiction. Some of you might be very familiar with this sentence, the concluding sentence of a short story titled "My Old Home" by the famous author Lu Xun. He said, "hope cannot be said to exist, nor can it be said not to exist. It's like paths across the earth. For actually, the earth has no paths to begin with, but when many people pass one way, a path is made." Back in college, it was one of the sentences that convinced me to study Chinese literature. Today, reading fiction helps me imagine a path even when there doesn't seem to be one. Thank you! (Applause)

David Perry: Like my colleague, I was thinking a lot about alternative facts. As I was preparing for this, I did not know that there would be chanting outside. We are clearly in a moment when this is much more timely and honestly political, than one might have anticipated. I am a historian but also a journalist, in the classic report-on-thing way, an opinion-writer, a think-piecer, and also a critic. I'm particularly interested in issues of disabilities and representation in literature and movies, both visual and written performances, but also science fiction. In fact, at the last book-launch of the esteemed Dr. Palmer's, we met in the 57th Street Books, and we will do that again in a couple of weeks.

I'm really interested in the different kinds of fictions. But what I'm really going to talk about today is Hamilton. I'm going to get there by starting here, in the Great Council Chamber of the Ducale Palace of Venice. This is an eighteenth-century painting of the sixteenth-century, 1577 redecoration after a big fire of the Great Council Chamber of Venice. This is very pretty and you should all go. Along each wall in this building, there are two epic stories, and I'm using the word "epic" really quite intentionally. One of them happened, but not at all in the way it was portrayed here on this wall. And the other didn't really happen at all. So, every day, the most powerful people come here, and are surrounded by these fictions that are fundamentally things that didn't happen. As I always like to say to my students, medieval people are not stupid. They may or may not believe it. They may or may not be more or less credulous than we are. That's the political narrative. But they are highly aware of what is going on here. So, I'd just like to take you through these stories and talk about them as fictions. We could talk about them as lies, certainly at this time there could have been many people in Venice who would be extremely happy to call them a bunch of liars—maybe still today, but certainly in the sixteenth century, and my Renaissance colleague here is nodding. You could call them myths—myth is another good word. I'd like to think of it as a formulist anthropological framing of myth by people like Bronislaw Malinowski. There's the myth as a story with a purpose or function. That work was really done in areas such as Indonesia, and other parts of the world where there are "primitive" peoples—if you will excuse me—who would look at myths. But unsurprisingly I'm going to talk about this in terms of fictions. And I'll present this famous quote from the famous historian Natalie Zemon Davis, who is particularly well-known for a wonderful book called the *Return of Martin Guerre*, and there's a really romantic movie, in which Gérard Depardieu is really Gérard-Depardieu-like. But this is the better book in my mind, it is called "Fictions in the Archives"—you can see why. "I want to let the fictional aspect of the documents be the center of analysis. By fictional I don't mean the feigned elements, but rather using the other broader shade of the root of the word, *fingere*: they are forming, shaping and molding elements, the crafting of narratives, and the diverse efforts to define the characters of historical narratives. The shaping choices of language are needed to present an account that seems to the writer and reader, both true, meaningful, real and explanatory." So, I've read this paragraph again and again, as my pathway to thinking about a bunch lies, myths and fictions that the Venetians produced, really for well over a thousand years, in my interests from about 400 to 1600 and maybe still to this day. You go there, talk to the guides, and will hear a lot of myths, real, true, meaningful and explanatory. So, there are these two stories, the first is the Fourth Crusade in which the Venetians built a fleet with a bunch of French, German and Italian Catholic warriors. They were going to attack Egypt but instead they took Constantinople. My first book was about the story of the looting of relics, sacred Christian relics. When these relics came back home it was an opportunity for fictional creation and for narrative innovation—it's a part of a broad tradition here. So, this is a 1204 story. We have the brave Doge Enrico Dandolo taking the cross, and there is a big battle. In this moment, right here, this is a great prince who's getting a letter from Pope Innocent III in which the pope says, "Go to the Crusaders and tell them to attack on Constantinople." And this is the narrative moment in which

the story says, the deviation to Constantinople is for the Pope. That's malarkey—it absolutely didn't happen. I'm a Venetian partisan, in the sense that when it comes as a writer, I'd like to take Venice fairly seriously, and like to say that they were smart and savvy. But this is just malarkey: the Pope said, don't go there or I'll excommunicate you. They went there, and he excommunicated them. And there's just no debate about that. But here on the walls, is a totally different story, which continues in very dramatic and beautiful works of art, big sea battles, the conquest of city, Baldwin of Flanders became the emperor and they all lived happily thereafter—for about three months, then they got killed by a bunch of Bulgars. So, there's a fiction there, that moment in the middle, the moment that, if you analyze it as a narrative, is not something that happened.

Here's one that's even more so. This is the story of the Peace of Venice in 1177, in which the emperor Frederick Barbarossa is raging across Northern Italy. The Italian cities in the north are gathering together, Pope Alexander has to flee from Rome, and ends up in a convent right here in Venice, in hiding and incognito. The Doge comes in and finds him and asks, what can I do for you? The Pope says, quite a lot. And then Venice puts together a fleet—that's a big fleet but not as big as the imperial fleet that they had to defeat, and yet with God on their side, they defeated Emperor Barbarossa who had to come and kneel before the Pope in Venice. And the Doge gets a lot of fancy gifts, including a sword. I'm really interested in the material culture, and these narratives of material exchange, whether it's spices from India, a piece of fish, or a sword. That's something that really drives me as a scholar. So, we have all these cool objects, big sea battle, and Frederick Barbarossa kissing the feet of the Pope, which is a big deal, and lots of other beautiful ceremonies. It totally didn't happen, not at all. Well, there was a big civil war and Venice stayed out of it. When it became time for a peace treaty, Venice was a nice neutral place with good negotiators to help as go-betweens of the hostile parties. It's really an interesting and important moment in 12th century Italian or papal history. But Venice was not involved in the battle. However, here in the very halls of power, you can see these incredible narratives, these fictions.

There were in the Middle Ages and beyond, actually more so if we move into the era of humanism, debates over authenticity, things that we might begin to talk about as the origins of the historical method. I have to say that the people I'm looking at are much less concerned with authenticity, not, again, because they were stupid or credulous, but because they were interested in the ways narrative-creation could get access to deeper kinds of truths, and help shape identities and realities. So, when I think of the entanglements—I love the word entanglement in the prompt which we were supposed to think for today—these are the kinds of narratives that come to my mind. There are historical framings here, but they are not necessarily true in an objective modern historical sense. But I guess they are true in a different way. And when in fact these narratives run into troubles, is exactly the moment in which humanist historians had to try to prove their accuracy in eight, ten and twelve volume compendiums, saying, no, this one kind of truth actually works as another kind of truth. And in this tension, and honestly, mostly failure, there is one final thing: around the same time as those paintings, a Venetian poet wrote this thing called the *Enrico*, it's like the *Aeneid* or the *Odyssey*. It's a very exciting story, in which Enrico Dandolo, this great epic hero, in his nineties and blind, still participated in the Fourth Crusade. But here, he is reimagined as this epic hero warrior, and it makes me think of Hamilton. Because it is not less or more true than the idea that Alexander Hamilton was a Latino-immigrant-fast-talking rebel genius, and I don't know that Hamilton will have long chain of history helping us imagine who we are and who we could be. I do think he has as much potential to do so as George Washington and the cherry tree, one of the myths I grew up with, which is also not true in any particular kind of way. And these are ways I think the long view of the entanglement between history and fiction inform the narratives that are being produced right now. Thank you. (Applause)

Ada Palmer: I'm happy to talk a bit next. I would also like to address the noises coming from outside the window, from the protests that are going on here, and the many protests that are going on across the country, by citing the fact that within a month of Trump's election, every single English-language publisher had sold out their copies of Orwell's *1984*. And they're now printing them a mile a minute because they cannot keep up with demand. We use fiction as a tool for understanding the situation we're in now, and comparing it to its historical precedence. And one of the great assets we have that's stimulating how quick political action has been right now is the historical example of what happened in the 1930s and the 1940s in Europe. And we also have many narrativizations of that, both fiction and non-fiction narrativizations, to make it very vivid and to help us relate to it and imagine what we would have done if we were there and know what we can do now. Our great asset is this: we have the case study, the real case study, and we have fictional reimaginations. And with all of these different tools for re-experiencing that event, we can then address a parallel event with great speed and efficiency because the fiction has in effect reviewed and, from a science-fictional perspective, previewed, the moral situation. One of the great things that science fiction does as a genre is to fight our moral battles before we get there by saying, you know, we think we're going to invent cloning in twenty years, let's go through a whole bunch of the

moral scenarios of what cloning might result in well before we get to it. So, we already have case studies for how to talk about the question of civil rights and whether artificial intelligent robots should get the vote. And that's a question we started fighting in 1943, whether artificial intelligent robots should get the vote. We're really well-prepared when that finally comes up, thanks to partly science fiction but also reusing historical narratives in that context, because when I say we started fighting that battle in 1943, we did, but in Japan, where what they were actually trying to talk about was racism, but there was ferocious censorship so they couldn't talk about racism, so they talked instead about anti-robot prejudices, and anti-robot activists wearing what we would recognize as KKK uniforms, lynching, robot-rights activists, and that was an acceptable way to examine this very real historical question in a fictionalized space, in a literary situation where the real thing was not, at that time, welcome. So, we use the combination of history and speculation about the future to explore a lot of moral and action-oriented questions, in a frequently very efficient manner.

You may have heard people comment on the phrase "as different as night and day," pointing out that night and day are more similar to each other than any other two things! They're both periods of time that are approximately twelve hours long, about the same length, you get seven of them a week. They're really very similar! Similarly, there's nothing more similar than the future and the past. It's a long period of time over which human civilizations evolve and interact, and when we're trying to imagine what the future might be like, looking at the past and how it flows is our most efficient corollary in a large number of ways. So, we always have to, we cannot avoid narrativizing when we make a retelling of history. Even if it's something as naked as a timeline, there's an act of narrativization with what you include in that timeline and what you don't, or if it's a timeline of every single thing, you make something bold, you have already introduced narrative into that. So, you can make the most neutral-seeming historical retelling, but still include narrativization, which is one of the arenas in which having both histories that strive to seem objective, be objective, and be distanced, neutral or balanced is very valuable when wielded in parallel with histories that attempt to be biased, that attempt to engage in bias. Because we ourselves experience real life filled with bias! We have people we care about and get upset when those people are hurt. We have places that are more important and loom larger in our imaginations than others. And we think of distanced histories, objective histories, as being in a way more accurate, but in many ways, they're a lot less like the real experience of history than a fictionalized narrative which calls upon you to have an emotional investment in one faction or another.

And I'm going to use a very specific example at this point that will embarrass at least eight of the people in the room. In my Italian Renaissance class (laughter in the audience), there they go! In my Italian Renaissance class that I run every year, we run a simulation of the papal election of 1492 in which each of the students is a different participant in the election. They're all members of factions, all scheme against each other, bribe each other and betray each other, and eventually they elect the Pope and then have a horrible war and burn down some part of Europe. It's a different part of Europe every time: last year it was mostly Spain, the year before that it was Genoa. It's different every time. And while David was talking about these histories of Venice, and everyone was nodding along and being interested in the stories of the history of Venice, the students who were in that simulation were having a very visibly different reaction, because the Venetian (points at a student) turns red as a cherry and embarrassed at Venice having these lies exposed and the two Romans next to her were sort of sympathizing in all those condescending "yes, your city-state is silly compared to our city-state anyway!" And the guy from Naples back there was just sort of sighing, and then the Florentine was sort of semi-detached until humanism came up and then he was very excited! And the Frenchman over here was like... the Italians! The Italians are doing all these stupid things again, in this wonderfully distanced and condescending way. It's wonderful! I watched that moment in European history replay itself perfectly. And that is a totally different way from the way we often think of approaching history, particularly in a classroom, but certainly gets to an aspect of what the history was like, that's actually very difficult to understand without that. Because when you're looking at something like Renaissance Italy, where these tiny fractious city-states that hate each other are betraying each other every six months, and fighting giant vicious wars over who didn't marry whose uncle's great-aunt's friend one time eight generations ago, and they're burning cities to the ground over things like that. WHAT? Just stop! Just have peace! What is wrong with you? That's the reaction you have when you just read about it as a summary. When you go to Wikipedia and read its summary of the War of the League of Cambrai, you start laughing half way through, because you're like: "I cannot believe anyone cared about this enough." But by presenting it in the slightly fictionalized way that I do in the classroom, where everyone is part of that faction, you come out at the end realizing exactly why they don't make peace, because there's a viciousness to having a side, being against other sides, betraying, being betrayed, not wanting the person who betrayed you to have power, wanting to tear them down by any means. And suddenly, a part of history which was opaque until we zoomed in and used a fictionalized narrative to get the bias and the historical empathy that lets us imagine ourselves in that position, a piece of history that

was opaque and incomprehensible to the modern audience is now comprehensible in a different way. And that's a tool that can be wielded in parallel to the wielding of more distanced histories, timelines, so that you get these two things side by side, so you get the Wikipedia entry on the War of the League of Cambrai, which tells you straightforwardly what happened. And by giving us different aspects of the historical experience, sometimes facts, sometimes experience. Fiction and narrative history, and attempts at distanced and objective history, the three of these things team up to give us access, and help cross the barrier between us and understanding past peoples, of which the biggest barrier is not language, or lack of information, but the lack of understanding other people's mindsets. The people of the past are aliens. Their way of thinking, their judgment about what is right and what is wrong, is more different from ours than any alien species Star Trek people have ever encountered in the history of the show, all of whom were made up by modern people and based on modern mindsets. Through exploring history via narrative, we can then zoom in on what it meant to be those people, and then through exploring it in science fiction, we can use it to imagine our successors who will be as mentally different from us as we are mentally different from the people who thought that painting those non-existent narratives on the walls of the Doge's palace was a good, appropriate and positive thing. And I'll close there. (Applause)

Ghenwa Hayek: I'm really glad I get to go last, and can work some of this discussion into what I was thinking about talking. Before I start, I just want to say thank you to the editors of the *Chicago Journal of History* for inviting me to be a part of this.

So, my approach to the relationship between history and fiction comes from the place I study, which is also the place I'm from. And the reason why I'm interested in the fictionalization of history is because I come from a place with very much and no history. And I'll explain that. I come from Lebanon. It's a very old country. Every time you go, or meet a Lebanese person, or go to a Lebanese restaurant, people will bore your ears off, or bore your brains out, with discussions of the Phoenicians, and how the Phoenicians sent the alphabet to the world, and then the Romans, and then the Crusaders, et cetera et cetera. So, there's a history that's very ancient, and one that's very celebrated, to the extent that it is often unwelcome when it's sort of piled on you in heaps when you're just trying to eat hummus. But at the same time, I come from a country that, between 1975 and 1990, fought a very long, protracted, and vicious civil war, as a result of which about 10% of the population died, about 20% or 30% were displaced, and at the end of which, to bring about the end of this war, rather like the people in Venice, a group of the men who had fought the war got together in Saudi Arabia and made a deal that they would become, rather than enemy combatants, colleagues together in the new political system that was to bring peace after the war in 1990. And this is truly what happened: everyone who had been a warlord became a member of parliament or minister. They divided the national pie amongst themselves.

But the problem is that people don't forget things very easily. But if you control the state, you also control the way that the state propagates information. And one of the way it propagates information is that it sets educational curricula. So, in Lebanon, history as is taught in school and in college ends in 1946. Nothing has happened in the Middle East, according to the Lebanese educational textbooks, since 1946, which if you think about it means that the State of Israel and the displacement of the Palestinians never happened, the nationalization of the Suez Canal and various independence movements across the Arab Middle East, Egypt, Iraq, never happened, and most importantly, the Lebanese Civil War never happened. Right? So that's how the state decided to get rid of the very inconvenient problem of factual history, by pretending it's not there. And while this may be more or less, or less of a problem for people who actually lived through the war and remember aspects of it, and even that is problematic because they only remember what the members of their village or their sect or political party they or their parents were affiliated with told them, but it's a big problem for successive generations who are losing that contact, and whose only knowledge of the history is through the stories that people want to tell, and most often do not want to tell, and the stories that the government definitely does not want to tell.

So, I became interested in history because effectively as someone who studies literature, fiction and authors, contemporary Lebanese authors, came in to write the gap. The writing of fiction became the resistance through which, sort of the cultural resistance, and the repository of a kind of memory of those years, of 1975 to 1990, and after 1990 also, a rethinking of what could have been. So, it's a speculative moment that used history and the fictionalization of history to think about the country's present and past. So, for me, fiction and history are connected in a very real, and very visceral way. And in fact, for people who study Lebanon, fiction is where you go to get a sense of, like *One Day in Shanghai* but without the official, or perhaps, without necessarily the same kind of political motivations, to get a sense not just of witness, but also of a counter-history, I'm going to say, to a history that is rejected, or is blanked out.

So, for example, one of the novels that I work on is a historical novel written in 2015. And the way that the young writer does this, the way that the young writer recreates the history is that he superimposes a story about a person trying to write a novel in the late 2000s with the story of someone who was living through the past of the 19th century city that

now no longer exists. Because one of the things that happened during the Lebanese Civil War was that the middle of Beirut, so the heart of the city, was razed to the ground. And in the post-war reconstruction effort, which was a privatization effort, through which basically the city was sold to a private company and told do whatever you want with it. And of course, no private company is going to want to restore a city not for profit. So, what they wanted to do with it was to create a theme park, a kind of theme park, it's actually... you don't pay an entrance fee, but it's that kind of space. And so, the novel then becomes a way of reminding people what was there, or teaching people who didn't know that this space existed, by for example, his technique, rather than bearing witness or actually using bibliography, right? To sort of reach in to the language of historical research and historical documentation in the fictional novel, to tell us, this is real. It plays on, I'm writing a story but I'm also referencing what is real, the authority of history, which is something we might want to talk about. And by doing that, the author manages to recreate a moment that may be fictional, but that also has grounding in a historical past that the political establishment, the political elite and the state want to erase. So, as someone who studies the Middle East and thinks about the terrible state of that part of the world at this moment in time, the entwinement of history and fiction becomes more and more necessary with every moment, and this sort of relationship of narrativizing the present but also having the presence of mind to think about when this present moment becomes past, what is it that we're going to remember and what is it that we are able to document, and what is it that we're able to archive, and how is this going to be presented is essential for me. So, I think I'm going to stop and maybe, with just throwing out there: what do we do with history when we're living it in the moment? And what do we do with this knowledge of the relationship between fiction and history, in the era of alternative facts? I mean, I never thought this would be an American problem, but I'm somewhat glad that it is, because this is a conversation that we can now all have collectively, and instead of being abstract it's now real to all of us in this room, not just to those of us who study complicated parts of the world. So how do you write a history of the present, is basically my question, and what do we have to be careful about as we write the history of the present. (Applause)

Jane Dailey: I'll just take questions from all of you. I'll say that your history of Lebanon reminded me of after the Civil War in Virginia, the Virginia Society for the Preservation of Antiquities, which was basically the Virginia Historical Society, founded their library and archive, which was dedicated to preserving the history of Virginia from 1607 to 1863. Right to Gettysburg! And then things went downhill after that.

Ghenwa Hayek: They'd rather not think about it!

Jane Dailey: Exactly.

David Perry: When the Mongols conquered Russia in the 13th century, the Russian chroniclers just didn't mention it! They'd literally been conquered by Mongols and periodically major players drop off the map because they've been executed by the Mongols, but these Russian chroniclers just don't mention it for sixty or seventy years. And then they defeat the Mongols and then suddenly it's everywhere!

Jane Dailey: So, questions!

Audience: So, you touched upon it earlier, that we currently have a type of history known as alternative facts, and historically we know that history is fictionalized and propagandized by winners. How do you propose that we as historians and as people get past the fictionalized narratives and uncover the truth, or do you think there is even a truth at all?

Ada Palmer: I mean I think we need to use the fictionalized narratives to get at the truth rather than a question of getting past them. In so many circumstances we learn as much if not more about a society from the story that it's telling at any given point than we do from what you would consider the bland fact, data, such as it is in a space like baptismal records I guess, or one of the more neutral documents we can think of. But for example, if you're a novelist and you're trying to write a book in any given decade in the 19th or 20th century, and you want to know how to write a plausible street scene, what shops would you walk past when people greet each other in the morning, what greeting to they use et cetera, you want to read bland romance novels that were written in that decade, because the fiction is who the people are and what their wild romance is, the inadvertent fact-keeping of those narratives is the enormous amount of information about the normal background that the author has had to paint behind the fictitious figures, that can be, whether it's in the 20th century or in the Middle Ages, one of the absolutely most informative sources that we have.

Ghenwa Hayek: And I would second that. I wouldn't make that distinction to begin with. I think that fiction has an enormous potential to affect people and have them respond. As Professor Palmer was saying earlier, that fighting alternative facts with real facts is not doing a lot of good, right? The narrative throughout the election was: this is not true, here's science, or here's history, or, this is a fact! But clearly, not everyone responds to that, so it can be part of our... I don't

want to say the word 'arsenal' because it sounds violent, but, you know, it's late. (audience laughs) It's one of the tools! Yes!

David Perry: I do think we shouldn't undersell the dangers of fictionalization of what's going on either, and I don't think anyone is, and we could talk about any number of historical moments, but I'd just like to talk about the inauguration. In a hundred years, is the picture on the wall on the National Gallery of Trump's inauguration, is it a hand-painted oil of the biggest crowd in American history? That's not an inconceivable fictionalization of something that we know right now is not true. I mean, it has a kind of aspirational, generative power that can be leveraged in wonderful ways, but also in dangerous ways. Like I said, I believe in truth, but I don't believe in objectivity. By shedding objectivity, can we get to truths in a better kind of way, in a more powerful kind of way? I hope so.

Jane Dailey: One of the best stories along this line that I know of, is at Versailles. Georges Clemenceau, who was the Prime Minister of France, was speaking to one of the German delegates. And the German delegate asked him, "What do you think people will make of all of this a hundred years from now?" And Clemenceau turns to him and says, "They won't say that Belgium invaded Germany."

Audience: It seems that intrinsically, fiction plays into human fears, the fear of the unknown and the other, such as tides of migrants, supposedly bad people flooding into the country. It's something that strikes, and that people react to, perhaps by contrast to science or fact. How do you recommend we deal with that? Do you think that positive fictions can counteract that? Or do you think that the truth can be framed so that you will elicit more visceral reactions?

Ada Palmer: I mean, yes. Positive characters are very popular. Superman is still actually more popular than Batman, as much as Batman is in many ways more awesome than Superman. The actual amount of sales of the story, it's Superman, the most unilaterally uncomplicatedly positive character that you can think of in the comic book world. People also really like positive narratives, and one of the experiences I've actually had since my novels have been coming out, actually since well before my novels were coming out is that in a world where science fiction and fantasy are full of dystopian, post-apocalyptic and grimdark, all of which are huge, popular genres. And when I first submitted my manuscript to the woman who was then my agent, she was saying that she really enjoyed this positive, exciting, interesting future where everyone has 150-year life spans and has a twenty-hour work week, and we have flying cars. She was just gloating in the office that all the other agents were all: "these books that I'm reading are so depressing." And everyone's reactions to it since have been: "How interesting and refreshing it is to see a depiction of a positive future." Not a perfect future, it has a lot of problems, this future, but it's an exciting and interesting future. There are very strong reactions to positive narratives too. One last example that also ties into a conversation that you were having before, and I hope others will weigh in on the same question, but I mentioned the 1940s Japanese engagement with the question of whether artificial intelligence should have civil rights. So, the central fictitious character created for this is Astro-boy, created by Osamu Tezuka who's the founder of modern manga and also a political activist as well. And Astro-boy was this enthusiastic, extremely powerful, extremely positively spirited boy-superhero who was atomic-powered, which was an argument that the atomic power, the dreadful atomic power that just destroyed Hiroshima and Nagasaki could be repurposed for helping the world and saving the world. And he and his classmates have field trips to the moon and also incredibly terrible encounters. There is a section when he is hired to try to intervene in the Cambodian genocide and fails. And you see piles of burning corpses. And this is a comic for seven-year-olds. It is a comic for seven-year-olds who have just lived through World War II and seen their parents' corpses on fire as well. So, they're very different seven-year-olds from the seven-year-olds you may be used to encountering in America here. But there are real seven-year-olds who are reading this. And Astro-boy is the symbol of the idea that there could be a positive, international and cooperative future in which America and Japan and all of these countries that had just fought battles were allies working together through technology to make a better future. And it was such an overpoweringly inspiring message that you cannot find a roboticist or doctor in Japan today, who, if you ask him, why did you go into it who will not say, I wanted to build Astro-boy. Three years ago, Japan hosted an international peace summit for the United Nations, and they decorated the main hall of the summit with a giant poster that said, "We must make a future that would not make Astro-boy cry." And for everyone who knew this character, it was an incredibly deeply powerful statement of the responsibility of how good a future they're setting out to make. That is: a) reusing a positive character in a very powerful way; b) reusing a character that was created in a moment of censorship and silence as a substitute for the fact that we couldn't talk about the war yet. But even that tool of thwarting censorship, now that censorship is gone and it *is* ok to talk about this, is still immensely powerful beyond that context, because the tools of art that we make in moments of attempted silencing are some of the most powerful we can forge. So, there's my response—do others have more?

Ghenwa Hayek: I would say that I think your question opens

up an issue of aesthetics that we would need another panel and about four more hours to address. It might be worth thinking about what kind of fiction, and what quality of fiction endures in moments like this and, you know, what quality and kinds of alternative facts and bad fictions don't.

Jane Dailey: More questions?

Audience: So, several of you talked about historical cultures and understandings of their own pasts and present. One thing that one of you mentioned is that it's dangerous and inaccurate to think of people in the past as being necessarily credulous and were understanding their own fictionalized pasts in a simplistic way. I just want to hear from all of you, about how you think of the ways in which people in the various past periods you have studied understood their own fictionalized pasts and presents and how that differs from how we, looking back on them, might judge how they framed their past and wrote their fiction?

Paola Iovene: I think the answer would really depend on the context. In the case of the paintings in Venice, they knew, of course! It was a process of making up. I think when people write the fictionalized account, they know that they are writing fiction.

David Perry: I think there are moments in the Middle Ages in which, for many authors, who are living in, particularly in monastic contexts and are deeply engaged in concepts of sacred time, often in quite apocalyptic ways, simply higher truths, for whom there are simply truths much greater than the stuff that actually happened. And so, in the acts of narrative creation, which I prefer—well, we can say 'fiction' again in the Natalie Zemon Davis context—in fact, their job is to get to those higher truths, which is different from accurate relation of the stuff that happened. That's simply not the job of those genres. So, no one is especially stressed about that; that's not the question. It doesn't mean that they think: 'Oh yeah, that's actually what happened.' It's that, 'here's the way this narrative is supposed to work, and I'm going to have my narrative work in that way,' because it has a function, a job to do. In fact, one of the things that really interests me, in my dissertation and in my first book, let's say, 17 years of my life, from the start of it to the publication, and still today, is that when you take a relic from a place and you move it to somewhere else, you've brought the saint along with it and you have to tell a story. You have to tell a story about why the saint wanted to go, how miracles happened along the way, in really standard, boring, trope kind of ways. Stuff happens, really predictable sorts of things, so at the end you can paint a picture and do a sermon and develop a new liturgy and write down the story and tell it orally, although we never get those because oral narratives are the dark matter of the past. You know, they're like 97% of everything that's out there and we don't have any of them. But still, we get bits. You have to do it, there's work to do. So, what's really interesting about most of the sources I work with from this big Crusade is that they totally failed to do the job. The Venetian ones do the job magnificently, but the ones from Germany and other parts of France just don't, because I think there's a disconnect between the function that the source is supposed to do and what they know actually happened because of the whole excommunication thing. It's a real problem. they're neither credulous nor stupid, and they're not, in some ways, good enough writers to do it; or, they come up with really weird things. So, there's a guy who blames the fall of Jerusalem on multiculturalism. Basically, the reason Jerusalem falls to Saladin in 1189 (Jerusalem is conquered in 1099 by the first group of Crusaders, falls again in 1189). The reason, according to this monk, who has spent the whole or most of his life in this little monastery in a beautiful part of France, is because there was too much mixing of races and language in Jerusalem. That's why it fell. And that's, I mean, nonsense. And not only is that nonsense, but it doesn't help his text do the job of authorizing the presence of this relic from Constantinople, it's a total non-sequester. And that, as a historian, is the kind of thing, once you get a sense of a frame, genre and the work it's supposed to do, when you encounter a source that really screws up that mission, that's often a moment to really dig in and start figuring it out. And that's, in fact, my whole academic career was me sitting in the sub-basement of my library at Minnesota with these 19th century editions of these 13th century texts thinking 'I know this kind of source, I know this genre really well. These are weird. They don't work.' And trying to answer that question, which, again, 17 years later, I might have some answers.

Ada Palmer: I think, in a parallel sense, when we're looking at, you know, Christian late-Medieval and Renaissance Europe in particular, within their understanding of metaphysics and religion, the world exists to *serve* narrative. It isn't generating narrative. God made the earth in order to give us a bunch of moral parables that we could use to learn about virtue so that we could be guided to heaven. And God made the Roman Empire, made it rise, made it fall, in order that we could tell a story about it, so that we would get moral lessons from those stories. So, the narratives are much more important, and in fact, causal than the material reality. We have it backwards when we are trying to understand it. And so, to a medieval person, if there's a piece of data, or to a Renaissance person, if there's a piece of data which contradicts the narrative, the data is definitely wrong, because in fact, the narrative made the entire world in the first place and if there's a mystery, it's: 'oh interesting, why does this piece of data which doesn't fit, why

is it here? How can we explain, you know, what miracle caused this obviously not-actually-real object to exist that interferes with the narrative which we know *must* be true with certainty. And you get this … it's easy to laugh at these things, but you know, you see images of the medieval sky and all the stars are in perfectly straight lines and this is because, rationally, the stars must be in perfectly straight lines because the heavens are perfect, and therefore it must be that if they seemed to be scattered about randomly, it's because the distortions in the upper atmosphere are making them seem to be where they aren't. And the accurate version is the logically certain: they're in a straight line. It's hard for us to prioritize narrative over reality the way they do, which is one of the reasons we often hit these medieval things or these Renaissance things and laugh. And, you know, there's a church outside of Rome that has a holy relic which is the skull of the baby Jesus. And the people involved in this have no problem with baby Jesus deciding to have a skull and leave it on earth in order to do miracles and communicate with people. He can do that if he wants, he made the entire Universe. He can have a baby skull if he wants to. That's not a problem, and it's not funny: it is funny, but it's also not funny. We have to work that hard until you get to the state where that makes sense before you're understanding the medieval thought process about narrative, really at all.

Paola Iovene: I think your question is very interesting because it makes us realize what is it that we *need* to investigate or we need to keep in mind even before asking that question about what's a fact and what's a fiction here. We have to take a step back and think about what kind of logic and relationship between narrative and reality, or imagination and fact, what kind of logic governs the world in which this work was produced. So, we need that kind of knowledge in order to access that text. If we don't have that kind of knowledge, then we can't make sense of it. And we also need to have some kind of knowledge—and I don't know where we get it, partly from the text itself, so it's all a bit circular—but we also need to take into account what kind of goals these authors had in setting up that particular narrative. So, we can't take our own concepts of narrative and reality and bring them there. We have to put on some other kind of lenses, I suppose, in many cases. I mean, not always, but in many cases.

David Perry: I'd say the stakes are really high. In the 12th century there's a monk named Thomas, who decided to promote a saint cult of a boy who he claimed had been murdered by local Jews. And he came up with a story, and even interviewed an ex-Jew, according to his story, who said that "yeah, every year we meet in France, all the Jews, and we decide which country is going to kill a Christian boy and then they draw by lot in which city they're going to do it, and then they do this sort of reverse, kind of reenactment of the crucifixion, to murder a Christian boy. Well, this is a fiction. And, it took him a while, it took him a couple of re-writes, to get it to a point where it caught with the local community, but then boy did it catch, and it's still caught. And there's a lot to say about that medieval myth and that fiction, the way it works. But what I want to tell you is that there was someone who believed that Hillary Clinton and John Podesta were running a child sex ring out of a pizza joint in D.C. enough to take weapons and to go investigate. And that too is a kind of fiction, and a fiction I see very connected to the blood-liable myth, obviously in a very different context and very different media. But as you were saying, what connects and how does it work and what are the implications of it, I think that the stakes can be very high, literally life and death

Ghenwa Hayek: And as someone who studies fiction for a living, I would just say that it's often the simplest narratives that need to be probed the most extensively. And the people who are trying to find and understand a complex situation and reality and, without ironing out or flattening out details, in ways that make you as a reader want to tear your hair out because they're using, for example, different languages or different grammars or they're moving back and forth, and sometimes their sentences are nine pages long… That's where the interesting intervention happens, where there are people who make things complicated, and not just the people who are trying to make things simple. Because from a literary perspective, it's often the simplest narratives that can be the most dangerous one. You can tell a really easy and convincing story eventually about a bunch of Jews who meet and decide to kill a baby once a year, right? But some of the most difficult novels are about the day-in-the-life of a random guy in Dublin in 1916. So, it's just something to think about. And sometimes, politicians and political language is very simple, and even overly simplistic. 'Build a wall.' 'There are bad hombres.' So, the language that we need to think about resisting that language, that is simple on the immediate face of it, but with time needs to become more and more complex, I think.

Jane Dailey: I'll just say that, the piece of the American past that most Americans will do anything to avoid thinking about, is of course slavery, and this is not because there is no great scholarship on slavery—there's lots of scholarship on slavery that's tremendous. Most people aren't going to read the scholarship, but there are also many, many wonderful novels about it. And I would encourage all of you, every single one, to immediately go over to 57th Street Bookstore and get Colson Whitehead's novel *Underground Railroad*, which is just great and won a Pulitzer Prize, the National Book Award, and it deserved everything it got. It has elements of science fiction in it, because, and I'm not giving anything away, one of the

great fictions of it to start with is that the underground railroad is *literally* an underground railroad, that moves through the South. But as an example of someone who weaves in actual history—he's quite learned in what he's done—but also puts it in the wrong time and puts it in the wrong place, but it's a fascinating, terrific book and it's also a total page turner. In fact, my heart was beating as I read this book, and I was trying to remember the last time I read something that made my heart beat the way that a movie does, right? So, I encourage all of you, you'll learn many things. Do not go home and say there was an underground railroad, but, that is something that in the United States, I think, novelists have reached more people with that history probably than historians, no matter how we try. So, one last question?

Audience: You all touched on the importance of personal narrative and personal experience in understanding history, but I feel when we teach history we often teach it with a very simplistic narrative, particularly, an example that comes to mind is East Germany. I feel like East German history is painted in one color, while the personal experiences of people, if you read them, are very varied. So how exactly do we go about telling the narrative of a certain period of history without being exclusionary to certain experiences?

Paola Iovene: What make you say that the history of East Germany is taught in such a specific way? I'm just curious

Student: Well, I'm mostly referring to the high-school history class in the United States, such as in the state of Ohio. It was taught in this way: capitalism won in East Germany, where everyone was spying on each other, that system fell and now West Germany has encompassed East Germany. And that history is kind of lost.

David Perry: You've answered your question. The problem is that history is leveraged as the history of civic formation and the history of the victory of a certain set of values. And I would say that's fairly universal in terms of how states try to control the teaching of history, especially to children. And if you don't have a history that you can easily leverage in that, you stop at 1946. Right now, there's a sustained, decades-long attempt to write the history of slavery as much *out* of American history textbooks as possible, which is not none, but you can mostly do a lot of it, you can make sure the Civil War is presented as about states' rights, you can say that, you can paint the myth of basically 'happy slaves,' to say, yeah, they weren't great but they were not, you know, most slaves were ok. And you know, the American history of civic formation is mostly what gets taught, the victories of capitalism, and you get people writing great fictional works like *The End of History,* Francis Fukuyama, who is now very regretful about it. He's telling us instead what's really going to happen next and getting a lot of press for that. But this is why college history matters, this is why college history that is not about coverage of historical fact but about building the tools, and college history taking place in a broad—I'm going to say liberal arts, but let's also not forget the sciences, but in the liberal arts context—broad disciplinary context, so that I mostly get to teach one person, any one student one time for fifteen weeks of their college career. There is no *fact* that I'm going to teach them that will be relevant; they can look that up on their phone—their phone has more information than the great encyclopedias of the early modern period could have dreamed of, you know, the phone has that. What they need are tools, what we *all* need are tools to access information, to engage it, and this is why college history matters and this is why political action to free high school history and to open up the possibilities of the imagination of what history could be from early on, and this is why, frankly, things like Hamilton matter. Someone earlier said that fiction is about fear, but I think it's about imagination and imaginations can go in a lot of different ways, but, certainly in terms of curricula, and what happens in curricula, imagination is shut down and we get a very closed narrative.

Ada Palmer: Both historians and authors of speculative fiction, such as alternate history, fantasy, or science fiction, are, as Ursula Le Guin put it in her National Book Awards speech a couple of years ago, are people who think of other ways the world could be, other ways of being. She refers to speculative fiction writers as realists of a larger reality. And historians are also this, we are studying not only this moment and the way we live, but lots and lots of other ways that people have lived and could live. We do that in college classrooms, and I and others do that in fiction. Fiction is accessible to a lot more people because the high school student who never makes it into a college classroom still makes it into a movie or a comic bookstore or a bookstore and consumes fiction in a variety of different ways. So, until the liberation of the high school curriculum from being taught to a standardized test that has particular standards and no space for the idea that we don't know, college history is about proving that we don't know things! Here's how you can go learn them. There's a giant gap, let's pick away at it as a team gradually over time. Being a professional historian is studying what we *don't* know rather than what we do know. High school history is still locked into being about what we *do* know, but fiction is not and therefore is giving people access on a different axis.

Jane Dailey: I'd like to thank our panel.