

Books at the Center: Stephen Best, Mario Telò, and Kris Cohe...

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SPEAKERS

Mario Telo, Casey Wayne Patterson, Margaret Cohen, Kris Cohen, Stephen Best



Casey Wayne Patterson 00:06

Welcome, and thanks for joining us in another installment of Cafe, the Stanford Center for the Study of the Novel podcast. In this episode, our host Margaret Cohen is joined by guests Stephen Best, Kris Cohen, and Mario Telo, to discuss Stephen's recent book, *None Like Us: Blackness, Belonging and Aesthetic Life*. Stephen Best is a professor of English at the University of California Berkeley. Mario Telo, is a professor of Classics at Berkeley. And Kris Cohen is a professor of Art History at Reed College. This wide ranging conversation, recorded on October 10 2019, draws on all three disciplines to discuss subjectivity, aesthetics, and the archive. Our conversation continued in the Stanford Center for the Study of the Novel's annual Books at the Center event, celebrating Stephen's work. The interview begins with Stephen describing his choice of format for the book, you'll hear Margaret join the conversation next, then Mario, and then Kris, we're thrilled to be sharing this conversation with you. So thank you, again, for listening in as we scholars have a friendly chat among ourselves.



Stephen Best 01:25

I think telling the story of how the book got written, is a good way of sort of explaining why it has the form that it has, which is a little eccentric, in that I write about a diversity of materials, all forms in my mind, works of art, poems, novels. And then I do, I also think of

like the archive as a kind of form, looking at it as a literary critic. So I actually I had a book that I worked on, was writing, called "Unfit for History," which is now the title of the introduction. And it was a kind of series of meditations of like problems concerning slavery and the archive. So I had a chapter on, like the problem of witchcraft, like how to like account for witchcraft, magical thinking in the archive, the book actually began and I do say this with the chapter on rumor in the archive, like rumors that would sort of circulate amongst slave communities in the Caribbean, about their emancipation, that was like, the first thing I wrote, was the, it was the germ of the idea for the book. So there were a series of chapters that were all about these kind of problems of, of like slavery race, in the archive, I finished that draft of the book, and I kind of thought to myself, no one's gonna be interested in this book, because historians have looked at these archives, but literary critics are gonna, for the most part, not really have much to say. So I, it was one of these cases where I was, I was unhappy with the forum, that the book took in the draft. And at that time, I don't know if maybe Toni Morrison's novel *A Mercy* had just come out, I sat down and read it, I just, you know, to figure out what I thought about the book, I started writing about it. And then once I wrote that chapter on *A Mercy*, I was like, "Oh, this book, actually, it has to be about these problems of slavery, race, identity, the archive, but I really have to foreground works of literature that maybe helped me to think about the problem, if they aren't explicitly addressing that problem." So I completely, I was on, I was about to go on sabbatical. And I just completely was like, "Okay, I'm gonna spend my sabbatical like reorganizing this book." And at the same time, in the midst of my attempts to kind of write, I would sort of in the middle of the day sort of escaped to SF MoMA, to go look at art to kind of whatever keep the juices flowing. And there was this exhibition at SF MoMA, of the work of Mark Bradford. And it blew me away, visually, but also, because just the way the work itself invites you to kind of ponder the process of its construction. And I would, I just kept going back every day to like, look at these works, because they were helping me to think about these problems of the archive, of matter that's in there, but inaccessible, etc. And so at that point, I just decided the book needed to be about the aesthetic objects that are helping me to think about the problems, not so much a direct attempt to address the problem of the archive, if that makes sense. And the larger context for this is that sort of in the field of African American literary and cultural studies, and in literary studies of late--last decade or so--there's been a real interest in problems of the archive. Sort of some of it coming out of deconstruction and Derrida and Foucault. But a lot of it having to do with the, the difficulty of reconstructing the lives of people who left no written record of their lives. Like I think that feels like a good synopsis of like the problem of the archive in the humanities. So I wanted to address that problem. But I had to figure out a imaginative way of getting to it, a way of getting to it that would make the book interesting to a humanist. So that's why the book has the shape that it does, which is not the shape that I projected, when I started working on the project. It's the shape that came about through really attending to the problems I was having. While I was writing it.

M

Margaret Cohen 05:50

Just thinking about process, building process into the work of criticism, I think is a really fruitful way forward, we would all want to talk a bit about your process.

M

Mario Telo 06:05

So I generally in my work, I try to bridge the gap between traditional classical scholarship and critical theory. And my new project, which is now finished, fortunately, was an attempt to reconceptualize the aesthetic experience of Greek tragedy, which for a long time, has been dominated by the idea of catharsis. And what is interesting is that it's not just our struggle with beings when tragedy is all about catharsis, but is about a moment of reparation, and moment of restoration, but also, when Freud and also Lacan and also other psychoanalyst talk about tragedy, in spite of the fact that they are the ones you know, theorized all the theoretical apparatus for conceptualizing anti catharsis, they actually go back to Aristotle. So when Freud in beyond the pleasure principle talks about tragedy, in the same section in which he discusses the for the episode, he says, with tragedy is about the pleasure of recouping the loss. Same thing, Lacan when he talks about Antigone, he says that it's precisely the splendour of Antigone, you know that moment of beauty that, in a sense, offers a reparative moment, it's kind of protection from the loss that otherwise tragedy exposes us to. So I wanted to go against this tradition a bit. And so I was, I was looking for a model that could help me theorize, the anti reparative, the anti catharsis in tragedy. And so I, I was really interested in Derrida's archive fever, where really preservation, you know, is seen as something constantly haunted by the death drive. And so preservation always implicates destruction. So I was interested in what in the expression is "an-archivic" aesthetics. That is how you can turn the idea of the co-implication of destruction and preservation in the archiving to an aesthetic mode and into an anti cathartic mode of feeling. So that's why I was interested not just in different theorization of the death drive after Freud, but also in Stephen's book, which is about the archive, of course, and also about queer theory. And I also use a lot of queer theory, especially Lee Edelman to theorize anti catharsis. And then I tested some of his ideas in this course that I taught in complit last year for undergraduates. And we started from antiquity with Oedipus. And then we ended with Valeria Luiselli's Lost Children Archive, which is actually something I'm going to talk about today trying to establish a dialogue between her and your book. And we, I assigned the chapter on Toni Morrison, to the students, even if we did not read A Mercy, but Paradise, which is also very archival, because of the oven and so forth.

K

Kris Cohen 09:21

So I, my work sort of sits somewhere between art history and Media Studies. I'm interested

in forms that the subject takes or that personhood takes or that humanity takes when it gets caught up in data collection, the data collection industries, but I'm not, I have always not wanted to start from the premise that the subject takes the form of a liberal subject. So someone with an interiority, who, if they're a proper subject, they speak their interiority out and they have a voice by way of that. So queer theory and Black Studies have been really important to me as ways of beginning with an idea of a different sense of how personhood is constructed or how it can be experimented with. So it does a funny thing to my process of working, which is that I, I often work with artworks, or works that have no ostensible relationship with media or networks. Partially because I'm interested in trying to sense out things that don't really get written on the face of either Twitter, right, or on the face of people commenting about social media, but that are sort of lived at the level of the subject and lived at levels of the subject that maybe have never existed before, some of which are really violent, horrible, and some of which maybe are interested in that possibility. So what I'm working on now, for instance, I look to early black abstractionist, Alma Thomas, as a way of starting to think about, in her kind of semi gridded patterns, paintings that she basically pursued for her life, as a way to think about the early incarnations of the computer screen, as, both as spaces where labor is sort of being reconceived as a way to think about how the subject exists within a kind of gridded structure space. So my process is very meandering at the start, because I'm trying to find my way into that problem, both through looking really hard at the paintings and doing all the responsible art historical stuff of learning about the literature about them, but also doing as much work as I can, on the technical side to understand that, so I'm, I'm always kind of working in both directions, I never quite know where to meet.

M

Margaret Cohen 11:35

It's sort of have floating around as you're all talking: like, what is the archive to you?

S

Stephen Best 11:41

Yeah, because on one level, it can feel a little bit like the archive is everything in the way that neoliberalism is that it's just sort of like everything you turn to is the archive. So saying, sort of specifically, in my case, it's like traces of the human subject that are not self representations, right. So it doesn't have to be in an archive, but it's like, someone's record of another subject. If I look back at the book, well, what seems to kind of come to the surface as like archival, it's like, yeah, the, it's that and that's that moment that Foucault is interested in, in "Lives of Infamous Men," it's like, it's not a self representation. It's, it is a representation by the state, of a, of a subject. But it's, it's also to go to Mario's point, it's like an-archival in the sense that it's also sort of destructive of the subject, it's, it's the only trace we have of these persons.

K

Kris Cohen 12:42

And you're often dealing at least in this book, with archives whose express purpose has been to delete or erase or destroy the very subjects that you're interested in getting at. So in some ways, it's like you have no choice but to approach them at least non-representationally, if not a-representationally, because they don't, because otherwise, in the the representation realm, they just, really often don't exist, or they exist as erasures.

S

Stephen Best 13:05

Mm hmm.

M

Margaret Cohen 13:06

Yeah, I think that it's also, your take on the archive, in a sense, urges us to think beyond representation, to try to look, because of course, every time we try to connect with the archive, it's a form of non-connection, and we are facing this gap. And I'm trying to create what is now there. And of course, we try to fill out that space, but the only possibility is precisely to engage with the work of art beyond representation, through sensation as effects, are affect. By the way, we are reenacting what Foucault and Arlette Farge did, because, you know, they had a, there is a radio interview, in which they talk about the project of the archive of the Bastille. And actually, that radio interview has just been published by Luxon, in a very [...] companion book with that essay by Foucault, and then some essays, but there is also the translation into English of that interview, where Foucault uses that famous phrase in relation to the essay, "The Lives of Infamous Men." And he talks about the archive as the guttural cry, the voices, you know, coming out, you know, of the smooth surface of power as a guttural cry, that's a phrase, which uses well knocking with Farge who was was very interesting historian with whom he had planned, you know, this edition, and then I think he had a fallout with the publisher. So that what we have, you know, the rich collection of petitions which came out in 2016 in English is actually very different from the [...] that he had originally envisioned for which, you know, the, the essay that you start from was supposed to be the preface. But I mean, is the guttural cry like is that sound cathartic? Like where does it sit?

M

Mario Telo 15:14

Well, I think that for Foucault, the guttural cry is precisely the voice of these people whom the power tries to suppress, tries to incorporate into its own system, creating this surface which is impermeable, and then there is a tear at a certain point, which is with guttural cry, you know, while, what Stephen does, I think goes beyond in terms of the in terms of

imagery and also of concept, because this tear within the surface is not just the emergence of what was supposed to be domesticated and cancelled out by precisely the relationality between that word and us, which cannot but be a kind of rupture.

S Stephen Best 16:04
Cannot be a..?

M Mario Telo 16:06
Well in your case, it has to be a kind of rupture.

S Stephen Best 16:08
It has to be a kind of rupture.

M Mario Telo 16:09
It's a kind of non-relational relation. So, I think you go beyond that image, I love that Foucault essay, my students also loved it. It's so beautifully written, in a sense, it really anticipates--phenomenology and, to the current interest in affect and the affective turn.

S Stephen Best 16:36
And that sensorium, between past and present, like--and it's, it's, it's not a bond of relation, you know what I mean? You know, that's what I tried to do. And, you know, it's, it's an interesting that Foucault essay is such a fascinating essay, because it structures a whole field of work, you know, in Queer Studies and Black Studies. You know, and, you know, I think it went from relative obscurity to then being, you know, the sort of--

M Mario Telo 17:05
Well now you it's getting republished constantly!

S Stephen Best 17:09
Yeah, the essay, yeah, but that sense, that sense of the sensorium, that, that is in the Foucault that's, you know, that, like, you I tried to track the way he uses that, language of vibration, to kind of talk about, you know, try to kind of address his implication in the guttural cry, like how he's implicated in that.



Mario Telo 17:34

Clearly, the guttural cry is his own, in a sense. Or, or an image of his own project.



Kris Cohen 17:43

Well seems like maybe, that given we've all stated some kind of interest in our work in what we call the non representational, it might be worth saying, why? What our ethical or [...] commitments are to that term or to that way of unthinking the subject? One of the reasons why I'm fairly committed to that idea is that--has to do with my archive, I suppose, which is networked life or digital capitalism, or, I'm not too committed to one particular periodization term, but but I am interested in what happens to the subject when they get produced by and interwoven with data. And in that sense, that, I think, is an importantly, non representational process, in the sense that it's not about harkening back to what a person was, that data isn't mobilized in that direction necessarily, even if it is an archive of one's past, it's an attempt to construct at least a place for the subject to inhabit, come to identify with, disidentify with, and then in that identification or disidentification with whatever image gets served up, amazon books recommendations, or whatever, that itself is data, that then helps the data align itself to you better. So it's a kind of an ongoing, unschooling construction, that's never quite you, but that you're always meant to sort of encounter and match yourself up with in some way. And so it's important to me that the vocabulary that tries to get at that is a non representational vocabulary, because I think it's sort of technically, that what that process is. And when when a kind of politics of representation gets put up against that, like we should have better data representations of us, then you come to get caught in the kind of toggle or oscillation that your book is so invested in tracking, which is like, it comes to look like, "Well, those are bad versions of us," in other words, bad representations of us, "and we need to make better representations of us." Or even something like the politics of obscuring your face with bad data. That seems to be a kind of a bad choice to me. And one of the ways to start to get out of that bad choice is to think about personhood and, in its non representational forms.



Stephen Best 19:52

I think for me, it's about long... you use the phrase politics of representation. And that was I was going to introduce that phrase, because I feel like a lot of my intellectual life has been shadowed by the question of the politics of representation, race and the politics of representation. Right. So when I was in grad school, right, the form that that problem of like representational politics took, I remember the kind of the intervention that black

British cultural studies did for like African American Studies in terms of like challenging African American Studies' politics of representation, of like, of American blackness as exemplary for blackness as such. But I've been like thinking, and this summer, I read Jeffrey Stewart's amazing biography of Alain Locke. And that biography just gave me a sense that the arc for this problem of politics of representation is much longer. And that, you know, the sort of battle--like, in some ways, the kind of intellectual battles and aesthetic battles between say, W.E.B. Du Bois and Alain Locke are very much about the residues of kind of 19th century Victorian politics of respectability. And what is sort of the, the kind of queer coup d'etat that the Harlem Renaissance was of wanting to kind of disrupt that politics of representation. And so yeah, I guess for me, it's, it's like wanting to kind of think my place in that longer argument about race and the politics of representation. And queerness in my own affective experience, but also just intellectual experience, is often offering a kind of disruption of something like representational politics. Black abstraction, the terms of like, a lot of the kind of debates, I don't really talk about them, but the terms of a lot of the debates around black abstraction, in say, the 70s. And 80s, was very much about like, abdicating responsibility for producing a positive representation of blackness.

M

Margaret Cohen 22:04

Can I ask a question, just about, you know, I teach the Middle Passage a lot, and the archive is so important to it, and the importance of melancholy historicism as almost the only attitude that one can have towards, towards it and, like a flashpoint, their narratives by African American seamen or Turner's *The Slave Ship* is a really powerful flashpoint. And I was thinking as I was reading your book, well, what would it be like to pair this with, you know, reading some archival artifacts from trying to recover the Middle Passage, and I'm wondering, I mean, Toni Morrison is obviously working through that a lot. But I'm just wondering if you have any thoughts about that?

K

Kris Cohen 22:53

Well, I think one of the things that's interesting about the way you deal with archival materials and not the Middle Passage per se, but, but materials like it and the way you do what you call melancholy historicism is, you don't actually turn away from them, from those materials. It's more about the disposition you have toward them. Right. So it's not as though the the solution to melancholy historicism is to leave the archive behind or the slavery or the slave past behind or leave the Middle Passage behind. It's to listen for a different thing. And it's to listen for the thing that we can know that we can identify with. That we don't know how to be intimate with. And that, it just seems important to me that it's, that in the, your discontent with the options posed by melancholic historicism, right, recovery on the one hand or erasure on the other, that it's still, you stay with the objects,

still you stay with the materials. And the whole latter half of your book dwells in those materials and stories from the slave archive.



Stephen Best 23:56

To the LA uprising, right? You know, like what to do with, in some ways, the rumors of what was said during that uprising, like what, you know, I don't want to say it's not true that someone or some group of people shouted they killed Martin Luther King during the LA rebellion, but I don't I don't take my task to figure out the truth or, like, what--the "what happened," it's more, what, like what is that as a form? Like the circulation of that?



Mario Telo 24:29

Well "disposition," I think is a great way... Because has the idea of affect built into it, of mood, but also etymologically, "position" you position yourself, you know, in front of the work of art, in front of the archival trace, but then there is the dis-, so it's not a connection, but it's a negative connection. It's a connection that operates through negativity through disruption. Through destabilization, as opposed to the kind of identification that the melancholy criticism, you know, aspires to create with an identification, which becomes then, you know, being Freud's classical definition of melancholy introjection. And so then carries with itself the danger of incorporation, and digestion, and policing and all of that, but this normalization--so disposition, I think, is a great idea because it really encapsulates this confronting the work of art, literally facing, facing it, but in a problematic way, which is the "dis-" without imposing an interpretive, you know, reading, because, you know, reading also, I think, at a certain point when you talk about El Anatsui. It can go back to your work on surface reading, and you talk about...



26:00

--Disposition, and dispossession. It's like, that, what you just said, connects those things in my head, in ways maybe that we're sort of working out in the writing, but I never articulated really clearly, it's like--but that's right. I should say something about the shape of that first chapter, because it relates to my own intellectual history and biography. But also, you're absolutely right, there's something I want to do in front of that work that's not about interpreting it. It's about allowing myself to be repeatedly dispossessed by it. I want it to produce that effect that it produced the first time, I keep going back to it in the hopes that it will produce that, which it won't do but, but like I said, like my intellectual biography, right. So my intellectual biography is that I was an art history major as an undergrad. And I thought about getting my PhD in art history. But I, at a certain point, I

sort of felt like something was happening in my art history classes, which is like I was being taught how to be a close reader, like just to really stand in front of a work of art, and describe and say what I see. But then I felt like I was being trained to write about works of art in the past tense, like, I was always having to sort of talk about what they did, yeah, what they did. I just like this is, you know, the very least this isn't producing its own kind of intellectual schizophrenia. But in with this book, I really, so for this book, I really felt like I wanted to write in the way that I was trained to look, which is to try to make the shape of the essay or the shape of the chapter, reflect my repeated returns, and the things I was expecting each time I returned, I feel like in some ways, I kind of got the courage to do this after I read TJ Clark's *The Sight of Death*. "Hey, he does it as a journal entry, I'm going to try to do it as a book chapter and see if that helps to figure out, again..."

M

Mario Telo 27:16

I think your book is a kind of performative utterance, because it's so lyrical. That's why I like it so much. And in a sense, you're kind of enacting while writing the kind of static model that you are advocating for, you know, like your gray reading, or the El Anatsui, you know, it's not gold, it's not trash. And so we are situated in the gap between gold, and... and so you situate the hermeneutic process in that aesthetic moment, you know, in that interval between these two poles.

S

Stephen Best 28:41

And this really does go back to my sense of the "we" that matters to me, which is the "we" of attentiveness and curiosity, that you can be, that you could be me, talking to myself, but that you can also be anyone else who sees the same thing as me. And it doesn't have to be everyone. Right? Like it's, I felt like I formally had to figure out how to, how to contend with the fact that like, we are always being, the imperative is always, to make claims about your object that are, they have some kind of validity.

M

Mario Telo 29:28

That has validity, that captures something that is in [...].

K

Kris Cohen 29:33

And one of the questions that I think you lodge in that space between you and the work that I think is really helpful, could be really helpful for a really broad range of projects is you, you don't presume that you know what a good outcome would be in approaching the thing, right. I learned something about the relation between African America or I learned

how to see his work as a way to think about the role that the Middle Passage has played in the present era, you know, you I think you as much as you can you try to suspend your thought about what it would mean, to do something good in front of the worker for something good to happen, whatever that would mean. And the other question that you leave there that I think is really interesting is, you allow us to wonder about what one is wanting or desiring of in, sort of, in and around a "we". So that a reading, you can ask after reading your book, what do I, what kind of "we," am I wanting, in producing the reading, producing an outcome and producing what... what implications does it have for some kind of collective formation? Not just academically, although academically, disciplinarity, yes, of course, but also more generally, at the level of just connection between one person and the other that might happen through reading or that might happen through art or, like, all kinds of interesting things stop happening, when you have to ask yourself the question of, "how am I--what, what kind of 'we' am I actually presuming or constructing when I'm writing this thing when I'm producing..."

S

Stephen Best 31:13

That came very late in the writing. The sort of brute, you know--like I said, the book, in its earlier draft was called "Unfit for History." And then as I was writing, that very amazing quote--I was maybe teaching David Walker, and that amazing day when I just, I just was like, "that rhetorical--". Because I wanted, you know, the book is about... So one of the ways the book deals with the, the guttural cry in the archive--it's a cry, it's like a scream, it's not it's not lexical, right? It's not, you know, it's not, it doesn't have a meaning. One of the ways the book tried to kind of deal with that was, I really, I really tried to use the tools of like, rhetoric, to sort of just deal with these negativities. The forms in which our relationship to them is like you say, dispossessive, negative. And then, you know, I came across that David Walker quote, while teaching, and I was like, that is all about rhetoric, and all about negative forms of rhetoric, none like--"I pray God that none like us ever may live again until time shall be no more," like a form of negative rhetoric that produces the very thing it sort of denied, its denying, or seeks to deny. Once David Walker kind of, at a certain point, he just like the whole book just got revised with the sense of the problematic "us," the difficulty of constituting the "us," both then and now. Or the contingent nature of that "us." In the name of what vision of the collective is this work, being produced like, that, it became clear to me that that was what I was grappling with, in all of the work in the field that I was trying to engage. It was the "us," the we that's kind of figured. So anyway, that's just sort of to say when, that, when did that question of like the scholarship, and the collective in whose name the scholarship is being produced come to the fore? And also, you know, I mean, you asked earlier about process, Margaret and I have to say, like, one of the things about, like having a book, not quite being satisfied with a book, and then having to kind of be honest, in your revision, was that, for me, I can't

remember who it was. Annie Proulx, or..? Who said, like the process of writing, that final stage of writing is the stage where you take the lies out. You know, like all of it, all of the little stories that you tell yourself to get to keep writing, and like to say, "Oh, this book is really about that." Like that process, it's like I had to take all the lies out that this was a book about the archive, or that this was a book about...

K Kris Cohen 34:12
For all the grant applications you had to write.

S Stephen Best 34:14
Yeah yeah yeah, exactly, exactly! You really do have to go back and like, make sure none of that is in there. But that also meant that I had to be very honest and full throated in terms of my critique, like, "Oh, this is really sort of about Black Studies and the question of like, our relationship to the past or the question of our condition, the possibility, is far more kind of vexed and complicated than we are often willing to admit."

M Margaret Cohen 34:43
It's incredibly inspiring, I'm just thinking of like our listeners for this podcast and for students, who are writing their dissertation, and having the confidence to go through that process and then, you know, take out the lies. [laughter]

S Stephen Best 35:04
Like graduate advisors, a grad--fellowship committees! Thank you, Mario.

M Margaret Cohen 35:12
Yeah, thank you really for just opening up a space for reflection. One of our hopes from the podcast is that people can hear how scholars talk among themselves, in that casual way when they might meet each other for coffee or in an airport.

S Stephen Best 35:28
Good night America.



Casey Wayne Patterson 35:37

Thank you again for joining us in this episode of the Center for the Study of the Novel's podcast Cafe. We would also like to thank Stephen Best, Mario Telo, and Kris Cohen for their generosity in agreeing to this conversation. Thanks our team at the Center for the Study of the Novel: to An Truong Nguyen and Maritza Colon for their operational support. To our graduate coordinators, Victoria Zurita, Cynthia Giancotti, and Casey Patterson. To Erik Fredner for editing, consultation, and sound engineering. And to our host and director Margaret Cohen. The Center for the Study. The Novel is a subsidiary of the English department at Stanford University.