

28 Recall This Book: Books in Dark Times 5

Seeta Chaganti, John Plotz

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John Plotz:

From Brandeis University, welcome to Recall This Book, where we assemble scholars and writers from different disciplines to make sense of contemporary issues, problems and events. And obviously at this moment there is only one contemporary issue, problem and event. So that's where we are. I'm John Plotz and our RTB guest today is the amazing medievalist, Seeta Chaganti, whose books include *The Medieval Poetics of the Reliquary* and *Strange Footing* (Did I get that right? Is it called strange footing?) which is this great book about a poetic form in the Middle Ages understood as a multimedia experience shaped by encounters with dance. Seeta I've loved talking with you about that project over the years. It's such a cool project.

And so this is another installment of our Books in Dark Time series, which as you probably know by now, explicitly takes its inspiration from Hannah Arendt's *Men in Dark Times*, which proposes that "Even in the darkest of times we have the right to expect some illumination. And that such illumination may well come less from theories and concepts and from the uncertain flickering and often weak light that some men and women in their lives and their works will kindle under almost all circumstances." So, at this dark moment, our idea is to talk to people about what brings them some kind of illumination, some kind of comfort or joy. And so we want to know that about Seeta and we want to know about you, dear listener, so have a listen and then ideally send us your own thoughts as well. So Seeta, welcome. It's really fun to talk to you.

Seeta Chaganti:

Thank you. I'm delighted to be on the show.

John Plotz:

And so Seeta, can I just start off by pointing out that when we talked before you really opened my mind because we use the words *comfort* and *joy* as a frame for this, but you talked about works that *sustain* and *engage* you.

Can I, do you mind if I just ask you to, to talk about that? Cause that seems like a great way to start off.

Seeta Chaganti:

Yeah, I'd love to talk about that a little. And I think, I think that those terms are actually related to a way that I wanted to respond to your introduction in fact in which you in many ways are rightly saying that we are, there is one big issue that we're responding to right now and we're kind of looking for possible ways of, you know, moments of illumination within, you know, within this very dark time as you say. And I you know, when you initially invited me to speak on this show, one of my thoughts was that I would really like to remind everyone that in addition to the covid-19 crisis that is happening right now it's important for us to remember other significant phenomena that are, you know, that are occurring kind of within that context and the ways in which they speak to each other. I am a UC Davis faculty member. And some readers may be aware that the University of California has been involved in what is becoming a system wide wildcat strike on the part of the graduate students right now. And so I've been very interested in the rhetoric that is emerging about the relationship between the covid-19 pandemic and particularly the ways in which many universities, including the UC have been responding to it.

Seeta Chaganti:

And what this means for us to see some significant changes in how we approach education and this kind of increased dominance of digital platforms and education, all of that. How that relates to some of the issues that have already been raised in the wildcat strike that have to do with teaching conditions and various kinds of inequities that you know, that the graduate students and the undergraduates and the UC system are facing. And so in thinking about a book to talk about today, I wanted to look at something that would respond to all of that together and acknowledge that even though it feels like we just have one big issue that we're thinking about right now. It's important for us to understand that, you know, a lot of other kind of really important political work, labor actions, you know, have happened in the midst of these, these other sorts of world historical crises and that the relationship between those different phenomena are really important.

Seeta Chaganti:

I'm going to just provide a little bit more of a frame for the book that I want to talk about, which is so I the book that I chose to focus on is W. E. B. Du Bois' *Data Portraits, Visualizing Black America*, which is edited by Whitney Battle-Baptiste and Britt Rusert.

And it's sounds like perhaps a somewhat unlikely choice for a medievalist which is how you've introduced me. And in many ways it is. But I was thinking about this actually and why this book spoke to me and what it had to do with my kind of larger, you know, intellectual persona. And one of the things that I realized in thinking about your question was that I do think that the books that sustain and engage me often combine different media. And I think that's always been true. You know? I think in my childhood it did mean picture books, which, you know, which have left, you know, in which the visual medium has left really lasting impression on me in many instances. But I think it's also very related to becoming a medievalist, you know which involves a book and manuscript culture that just understands the place of visual and other kinds of media within the book, you know, and how they operate very differently from how we might of, you know, in a, in a more modern context when we are asked, you know, what's a book that comforts you? We might often think of a novel or you know, something where that pictorial element is not really a kind of fundamental component of it. And so I think, you know, and so a lot of my both my interest and my training, I think really predisposes me to being really, again, sustained by the exercise of thinking about relationships between visual images and text in a book and kind of understanding, you know, what, what kind of truth is uniquely being communicated here through that interaction.

And so that's the reason why I chose this book, which for, for listeners who are not familiar with it, it collects a set of a little bit over 60 poster-boards, I guess, that W. E. B. Du Bois made in collaboration with the school of sociologists at Atlanta University which were intended to be and were exhibited at the Paris World's Fair Exhibition in 1900 as part of a component of that exhibition that was supposed to show its viewers something about black life in America.

John Plotz:

So Seeta I'm sure our, our listeners know about Du Bois as the author of *Souls of Black Folk* and they understand him as an incredibly important African-American intellectual. But can you fill in the back picture of his like relationship to academia or how he came to be working at Atlanta University?

Seeta Chaganti:

Yeah. That's a good, that's, that's a good question actually. John. You know, I don't, I don't have a lot of information, but what I do, you know, but what I what I do, what I feel like I can talk about a little is Du Bois' interest in sociology as a discipline, you know, and the way that and the, the ways in which it, like many other kinds of academic disciplines is, you know has a presumption to subscribing to certain kinds of hegemonic methodologies and Du Bois was very interested in interrogating some of those assumptions behind disciplinary method and sociology that would make it a more just field and one that, you know, that could actually act towards racial justice and economic justice, you know, in, in a different kind of way. And I think, you know, the World's Fair opportunity this, this was not the only way in which Du Bois was engaged in that World's Fair.

He consulted on other aspects of it as well. And I think it's this interesting moment of Du Bois kind of on the one hand, you know, wanting to present a certain kind of picture of black life, you know, in, in the United States, in some in, some positive and affirming ways that were, you know, that may have been the kind of traditional way of thinking about this, but also wanting to be really clear about how to you know, how to manifest these social inequities and to, and to make very clear that these, that these inequities are systemic and are not derived from the kinds of racial hierarchizing, you know, that many of the that of the American and European visitors to the exhibit might have made a, that might've been an assumption that many might have brought. And so that's something that was really important to him to undermine.

John Plotz:

Cool. And I was frantically Wikipedia-ing as we were speaking and I, I was just trying to figure out the chronology. So *Souls of Black Folk* is actually three years after these diagrams come out and his first couple of books--*The Study of the Negro Problems* and *the Philadelphia Negro* and *The Negro in Business*--those are all sort of more sociological books that he was publishing like pre 1900 and he was studying in Germany. He got a PhD at Harvard I think. I think he was the first African American to get a PhD at Harvard. So it's, yeah, it's just interesting to think about the analytic underpinning of a book of later work that has, that is of course analytic but also so poetical and literary as well.

Seeta Chaganti:

Yeah. And, and kind of differently activist in focus. I guess, you know, but I do, but I do think that activist consciousness is there just again in kind of thinking about thinking about scholarly methodology. Like I think, you know, I think to interrogate traditional scholarly methodologies is in itself a form of activism. And it's also, you know, I think one of the things that becomes evident in, in some of these plates, particularly in the earlier ones is his interest in the relationship between black life in the United States and Africa, you know, and so that also, so he's, you know, so he's, he's really I think throughout his career he's kind of negotiating what that relationship should look like and how to understand Africa, how to understand, you know, the kind of American consciousness of Africa as well as Africa on its own terms. And so that, you know, that's also something that continues to emerge in his, in his political writing.

John Plotz:

That's great. So can you talk, is there, can you talk about one particular plate that you find intensely engaging or sustaining, I guess?

Seeta Chaganti:

Oh, that's a good question. Yeah. So, well, you know, just to, to come back to our earlier theme and one of the things that really struck me about the collection as a whole is that is how many of the plates are interested in education. And in, you know, in statistics about education. And so let's see, I'm just looking at plates 49 and 50. So these are, you know, so these are, these are two juxtaposed plates in which we have these in which Du Bois and his collaborators are experimenting with graphic art to kind of make often quite trenchant points about what is happening for black Americans and what kind of impact education might have on them. So he does, you know, in this plate that I'm looking at he uses a very sort of limited color palette that's just black and red.

Seeta Chaganti:

And so, you know, and so there's, he makes a lot of, the whole group, I guess makes a lot of really deliberate choices about how they are going to use color and contrast. And color to show both the existence of inequities and the extent to which black Americans have really engaged themselves productively in opportunities that are there when they are provided to yeah, to just sort of enter into society in a different kind of way to, you know, to, to combat the dispossession that they you know, that they've found themselves placed for

them. And you know, there's a, there's also a very interesting chart about illiteracy about the illiteracy of black Americans in comparison to other countries. And that one also, you know, it uses color in this really striking way by, by singling out the bar that represents black Americans as opposed to all these other countries. So in one sense it seems distinct, but in another sense, the way that the bars are arranged on the page, it becomes very clear. And I think this is a pointed comment to viewers at the, you know, at the Paris exhibition that there are many other European countries that have much higher illiteracy rates or lower literacy rates. You know? And so it's, it's again, this attempt to use these nonverbal means, you know very subtly but very powerfully to you know, to, to combat various kinds of systemically generated perceptions.

John Plotz:

So, Seeta I want to come back to that point you made earlier about being a medievalist, ergo you're someone who thinks about-- I guess ekphrastic is the wrong question--but that you're thinking about the symbiosis or the interplay between the visual and the textual. Do you think, do you, when you pick up this book and you find this book engaging, is it engaging to you because it seems to indicate a way forward in which like the modern world could do the same thing that those medieval texts did that you like so much? Or is it more like a path not taken? Like you feel like it would have been great if what Du Bois did could, you know, continue to define scholarship but it doesn't, like, how do you think about this book?

Seeta Chaganti:

Yeah, that's a really interesting question. I mean, I think I'm sort of ever the optimist and I'm always kind of hoping that, you know, that anything that, you know that allows us to think in some new interesting way could be a path forward to, you know, to just something better. And I think it's kind of hard to kind of carry yourself along day by day without, you know, without thinking about that. And I think for me and, and your, your question about the medievalist training and what that brings to this inquiry is I think an important one for me and something that I've thought a lot about. And I think for me it, it boils down to this idea that, that medieval cultural productions like manuscripts that have pictures in them or, or wall paintings that, you know, that, that have poetic text at the bottom and images at the top they create these really interesting opportunities to find asymmetries and disorientations within what looked like apparent symmetries, I think in, in

ways that, you know working in a single medium is, you know it's not as possible to do.

And that's a lot of what the book, *Strange Footing* as you mentioned was about, you know, on particularly because dance is an art form, particularly early dances and art form that people tend to associate with, you know, harmony and celestial spheres and all that stuff. And I was really interested in looking at how multimedia representations of dance, mixed media representations of dance were able to kind of cast into relief for us all of these little disorientations and asymmetries and slippages that happen within something that looks, you know really something that has a lot of periodicity and a lot of symmetry, you know, and visual harmony. And that I think is what really helped me to approach the Du Bois because, you know, partly what they're doing is experimenting with ways to make data visualization really beautiful and harmonious, you know and they succeed in many different respects, they have all kinds of really interesting kind of graphic experiments they do with mixing typefaces and with changing bar graphs into spirals so that you know, so that a graph that would ordinarily be a bunch of straight lines becomes something kind of circular and curvilinear. So, you know, so there's a lot of really, really stunning visual experimentation. And I think that for me, what that really opened up for me was the ability to see how carefully and how brilliantly these boards, these placards, are drawing attention to you and sort of non-verbally commenting on all of these disorientation, inequities, asymmetries, you know things that, you know, injustices, irritants, all of these things that, you know that, that keep us from, you know, keep this society from being what it is. How, you know, how they are actually rendered even more powerfully through the means of these very symmetrical kinds of visual images.

It will be a little surprising to anybody who listens to this, who actually knows me, that I chose this book because really I'm a poetry person. You know, I like the fact that I didn't choose a poetry book is significant in some ways, but I think it is because like you asked me to think, you asked me to really sort of, you know, think in that most inward plane about what kind of thing, actually you know, I respond to in some very deep way and I really think it's pictures or like the relationship of text and pictures, you know, which obviously there's poetry that, you know, that that involves that also. But a lot of it is medieval poetry, you know?

John Plotz:

Well, yeah, no, it's interesting. I actually am, I'm waiting for my first poetry discussion. Like I keep thinking someone's going to talk about Auden or Shakespeare or Wyatt or anything. But you know, so far I've, I've asked a couple of people and they've just like swatted it away. So it's interesting. Yeah, that's

Seeta Chaganti:

And now I'm thinking, I could also have talked about *Troilus and Crysede*

John Plotz:

A lot of people I've talked to have mentioned PG Wodehouse for example. So clearly like there's one set of people who are just kind of diving into like comfort food, I guess you could call it. And that clearly does not seem to be your impulse at this moment. And so that is interesting.

Seeta Chaganti:

Yeah, I think that's right. I mean, I was, you know, and I've was thinking about this cause I was also, I mean I, you know, after listening to the talk you had with Alex Star, I was thinking about like other directions this could have gone in. And I definitely understand that impulse, to turn towards particularly novels. Again, I think just because, you know, there's this way in which they create this other world for you to, even if it's a very realist, you know, kind of, you know, even if it's very naturalistic kind of world, you know, the, the impulse to like, like one of the novels, I was thinking about something like *Anna Karenina* right there, you know, like you get to the end of that novel and like you're sad because there you were in this world with these people and who thought you were part of that world and now it's over and what are you going to do next? And you know, I definitely remember feeling that even reading it as a 15 year-old, you know, back to the children's books.

John Plotz:

Yeah. And you're saying, and you're not saying *sad* because of what happens within the book. You're saying *sad* that it had to end....

Seeta Chaganti:

No, just, just be that you're, yeah. That, that you know, that that was a finite world that had an ending or that, you know, or that if it does go on, you

don't get to go on with it, you know, like that. I remember just feeling very sad about that.

John Plotz:

I think that's one of the reasons those Narnia books feel so manipulative at the end, because, you know what I mean? Cause the narrative arc insists, okay, it's so wonderful to be in this other space, but we know how that works. And then *the Last Battle* just kind of torques that and says, well, Susan is bad because she's not a good Christian girl. She gets expelled and the rest of them just get to go on and on into the inner Narnia and the inner inner Narnia. And you just, what a crock, you know?

Seeta Chaganti:

Yeah, it's true. And it's true that I think, you know, the, the Narnia books kind of return us to the medieval theme again in a lot of ways just because like that was, that was an important mine for, you know, for Lewis and coming up with a lot of the, that injury in those traditions. And I do think, you know, just to come back to your question about, you know, the choice, like what kinds of books I'd choose. You know, I, I do think a lot of it, again, it does have to do with the fact that when you read a lot of medieval literature, you aren't really expecting it to do the same thing that a 19th century novel is expecting. You're expecting a 19th century novel to do. I mean, in a lot of ways it, you know, is always going to feel like a pretty alien world, what you're looking at. I've never had that experience. You know, I, I don't feel immersed reading *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* in the world of storytelling of the Green Knight. And maybe there are other medievalist who do. I've never been one of those medievalists you know, I'm very conscious of that being an English tradition that I'm not really part of and you know, and so I don't guess so I just don't, so, so I, so in thinking about your question, I wasn't really bringing that set of expectations to the books I was thinking of. The set of expectations I was bringing had more to do with what is going to allow me to see something interesting and engaging that might provide a way forward out of many of the crises that we're facing right now.

Yeah. I think, again, one of the reasons that I am really drawn to Du Bois is that I like, I really like to think kind of metadiscursively and methodologically, you know, and so for me, like for example, as I was talking about before, like for me the, you know, the method of trying to do what a medieval reader does with our kind of multimedia texts like that is a helpful method to me for thinking about like what I could draw from what Du Bois

and his Atlanta school of sociologists are doing here might be useful to think about it. So I, so I really tend to kind of think more in those sort of more the back of the tapestry than the front of the tapestry, I guess. You know?

John Plotz:

Yeah. The back of the tapestry. Oh man, I love *back of the tapestry* analysis. That's it. That's the heart of my favorite book, *House of Mirth* where they said Lily Barth is behind the tapestry where the knotted ends hang

Seeta Chaganti:

Yeah, Wharton is actually, so I mean, you know, in, in your, in your question about sort of categories that, those kinds of books that are, you know, that that can be comforting that way. And Wharton is, I mean Wharton is another one, but you know, those books are gut-wrenching, but there's also something about them that

John Plotz:

So comforting in their gut-wrenchingness?

Seeta Chaganti:

Yeah, I guess so. I guess that's right. Yeah.

John Plotz:

Which ones are you thinking of? *House of Mirth*?

Seeta Chaganti:

The Age of Innocence really, but also like *Ethan Frome*. I really, they're such difficult books, but she, you know, like I just kind of she was-- and she was super problematic figure herself in many ways--she just had a really interesting eye. Againlike these are, they're very visual books, you know, and everybody, like I'm the only person who liked that Scorsese adaptation of *The Age of Innocence*.

John Plotz:

Oh no, no, I'm with you. I thought that was great. I totally agree. Yeah.

Seeta Chaganti:

I felt like the thing that that adaptation did was that it, it tried to inhabit her eye, you know, like it really, you know, like it was, it was very attuned to what particular kinds of visual details she noticed. And it, and I think it did a really nice job like taking those visual details to produce this reading of the book and to kind of emphasize this idea that--to emphasize Newland Archer's blindness essentially, that, you know, he's thinking that he sees things that other people don't see all along, when in fact he's failed to see something really important that everyone else basically saw the entire time. You know? And I think, I think the visual reading of that in a way that Scorsese lit and blocked the whole thing. I thought that worked really well.

John Plotz:

Yeah. Not only am I with you, but are you also a fan of the Jane Campion *Portrait of a Lady*? Oh my God, I love it for the same reason. It just travels with lines of sight so incredibly. It just sits you in Isabel Archer's ignorance and in her moments of illumination..... I just love, it's like a very particular and sort of torqued account of the novel. But I think it's amazing.

Seeta Chaganti:

Yeah. And yeah, and I think line like lines of sight is an important phrase. Cause I mean, again, just, I, I'm trying to think as we're talking about, you know, all the different things that I would like to say about how amazing these Du Bois, you know, these Du Boisian objects are. And I think that idea of line of sight is also really important. And that, you know, and the, the introductory matter for the book talks about a lot about how he is really anticipating and ahead of certain kinds of modernist aesthetics and, you know, and the ways that they are experimenting with lines of sight and with proportion and, you know and, and kind of mixing different kinds of textual expression, you know, that sort of thing. And I think that's, you know, and I think the, the subtlety of that to, you know, to, to make these points about really glaring systemic inequities without, without making them verbally, you know it just, it, I think that's, you know, that's also something really powerful that needs to be acknowledged about, about what Du Bois is doing here.

John Plotz:

Yeah. Well, so I mean, boy, see that's a whole 'nother conversation we could have because it sort of relates to a way of thinking about those debates around early film where Eisenstein is championing montage and you know, people like Bazin are championing a deep focus. And so you think about

montage and deep focus as being alternative accounts of what the rectangle of the film frame can do. But maybe we need to think about those other kinds of lines of sight as well as, you know, another possibility that's enabled by the rectangle of the printed page. So yeah, I mean 1900 is a really exciting moment for how visual and textual are supposed to interact.

Seeta Chaganti:

Yeah. It turns out, I mean that's the thing, it was really out of my field, so I feel like I don't, I don't have the kind of rich context that you do for thinking about what 1900 means, you know I'm just sort of looking at this one particular instance.

John Plotz:

No, it's great. I mean, there's a great book by Lynda Nead called, I think maybe "The speed of the moving image" or something where she's just interested in how visual materials can be so readily put before the eyes of audiences by the end of the 19th century because of publication technology changes and you know, the implications of that for, yeah, the visual and the textual going together maybe in ways that do revert back to medieval patterns.

Seeta Chaganti:

Yeah. And I think that that would, because I, again, you know, to come back to the question you were asking before about William Morris, like I do think that sort of dichotomizing impulse between one kind of temporality and another, like, I think that's a very, that's a kind of modern limitation, you know, that, that in fact, I, I don't, you know, I, and I think maybe, and maybe that is one of the other things that I find so compelling about the Du Bois is that I think it's not, you know, it's, it's not really subscribing to either a sort of serial form, you know or a, or an attempt to kind of grab you instantaneously with something visual. I actually don't think either one of things is going on, you know I think it's actually finding this way to create a sort of, you know, interwoven narrative that, you know, that is, that is, that gets you to experience it in time and in a much more complicated way.

John Plotz:

Yeah. Yeah. So, just as you know, I feel like one of the big things that we debate now is this whole question of like, how to lie with numbers. And maybe there's another counterpart to how lie with them, just like how to tell the

truth with pictures. And you know, that's a story that we are seeing increasingly in the 21st century.

Seeta Chaganti:

Yeah, yeah, that's true. And it comes back to, you know, we had talked about this a little bit earlier, but you know, it, it comes back again all of these questions about uses of data and how we educate each other also. You know, and this, you know, this kind of this false sense --there's a great piece about this that we can put the link up to somewhere that makes this point, that this turn during the Covid epidemic to instruction that is digitally based and that is kind of data-driven in many ways, you know, it, it creates this false sense that the format in which that instruction takes place (because it's basically a STEM based format in a lot of ways) is neutral and so you can, you know, "you can communicate any kind of content in it neutrally." But of course it's *not* neutral, right? I mean there's all kinds of, you know, there's all kinds of other you know, underlying ideologies for those kinds of platforms and you know, and concerns around surveillance and concern, you know, like all kinds of ways in which the platform of education that's been chosen now apparently as a sort of default, you know is actually not a neutral platform at all. And so I think, you know, the Du Bois also does a really interesting job, kind of foregrounding how these acts of converting data in various ways are these acts of sort of presenting what would seem to be objective or a quantified data, you know, are, are always kind of, you know, ideologically driven and, and, and or you know, are never just sort of neutral formats.

John Plotz:

Okay, well Seeta, from one chicken lover to another I have to thank you. That was amazing. And I'll just quickly read the credits and say that *Recall This Book* is hosted by John Plotz and usually Elizabeth Ferry with music by Eric Chasalow and Barbara Cassidy and sound editing by Claire Ogden, website design and social media by Kaliska Ross. And we always want to hear from you, especially now with your comments, your suggestions, your criticisms, and also the books that you are reading at the moment. So email us directly or contact us via social media or our website or just using the hashtag #booksindarktimes. And so if you enjoyed today's show, please be sure to write a review or rate us on iTunes, Stitcher, or wherever you get your podcasts, and please check out the other Books in Dark Time conversations, including with Alex Star, Martin Puchner, Carlo Rotella and Elizabeth and I

also had an extremely fun one, which was also about the late 19th century. So Seeta, thank you very much. And thanks to you all for listening.