

John Plotz

Dear listeners, how often over the years have you heard me open with something like this? "Welcome to a Recall this Book collaboration with Novel Dialogue's fantabulous host Aarthi Vadde." So I began saying something like that back in 2021, but even before that, Aarthi had established herself as a field-changing comparative literature scholar and as the E. Blake Byrne Professor of English at Duke. Aarthi, I know you so many ways as president of the Society for Novel Studies, as my co-editor of the Novel Dialogues book, as co-editor of the Norton Anthology of English Literature Volume F, and co-editor of Critic as Amateur, and author of the Levin Prize-winning Chimera as a Form, modern. modernist internationalism beyond Europe, 1914 to 2016 So that's all quite a mouthful. I know you that way, but now we need a brand new leaf to the book of Aarthi because just this summer you published with Columbia University Press "We the Platform," which is the first crowd-based account of literariness in a world of exponentially growing written expression. There's so much to say about this book. It's not just a caution against nostalgia for a past that never was, it's a really clear-eyed account of massed writing in the 21st century, and as you put it, "a demonstration of how the internet changed literature and how literature changes our perspective on the internet." So, Aarthi, welcome! It's so great to have you at Recall this book.

Aarthi Vadde

Thank you so much for having me on, John. And I feel like we've been in the discussion for so long that this is just a continuation of that. And I've never been more comfortable talking to someone on a podcast.

John Plotz

Great. We like to invite folks to start us off by laying out the key claims of the book, maybe its inception or its intervention for our brilliant but lay listening audience.

Aarthi Vadde

I wanted to write "We the Platform" because it seemed to me that many scholars were going on social media, many people were going on social media and talking about the issues of the day, and very few people were reflecting on the fact that these conversations were moving from the print world to the digital space, and

didn't even seem very interested in the fact that all of this was accumulating in an entirely different kind of infrastructure. And so I was very initially disturbed by what I saw as online movements like citizen journalism around Black Lives Matter and the Me Too movement. They seemed like just incredible examples of the kind of justice people seek when institutions seem to be failing them, and I was interested in that interplay and interaction. But being a literature scholar and not a comms scholar or a sociology person, I thought "I want to understand what this means for contemporary literature. I probably wouldn't say that the like that the writers who were publishing online were looking for justice on the level that people posting videos of police stops were looking for justice, of course, but for many young writers and for many writers whose work was getting rejected en masse by publishing houses, the internet was absolutely an outlet for getting your book out, for getting your thoughts out, and many of the kinds of stars of our contemporary literary world today started online. Though it's part of the formation of an author these days, Patricia Lockwood is the obvious example, but there's also Lauren Oyler, who I talk about in the book, and then there's Tao Lin. And there's just this sense that there was a kind of nostalgia for the early days of the internet and the weird literary movements that were bubbling up in poetry and in fiction, but that could only live for so long, and so we can start there, but we don't really end there. Now, I think the publisher platform framework is much more corporatized, but it still needs to be elaborated and understood as part of how contemporary literature is published. So, I don't think there's a way in which this has led to more justice or equality for writers of color, or something like that. But it is certainly true that for a while, if you weren't getting published, or if your writing didn't seem to have a legible market through this entrepreneurial self-publishing, you could potentially create one for yourself.

John Plotz

I was thinking about the tension between the paradigm of surveillance capitalism. I'm in the thrall right now of books like **Empire of AI** or **Careless People** which really focus on the new gatekeeping, gatekeeping 2.0 of the yeah what you call the media corporate empire, the kind of bogus platform neutrality that is actually data management and corporate gatekeeping of a newer kind. But I appreciate your pointing out nostalgia for something that honestly I was already a grown person when that thing occurred that we're not supposed to be nostalgic about, which is that explosion in the '90s of yeah the possibility that anything could circulate, so yeah, it's interesting. I hear you navigating between like the older gatekeepers who people wanted to get away from in that earlier moment, coupled with grappling with what do these new gatekeeping forms look like.

Aarthi Vadde

Yeah, no, it's so funny to think about like how at some point, like in the early 2000s Facebook was a plucky startup, and Disney was the corporate, the evil empire. And when I return to the rhetorical formation of Web 2.0 I look a lot at the work of Larry Lessig in *Free Culture* and *Remix* because. a really brilliant argument to make, right? To construct legacy media as copyright extremists, and to think about how publishers have, or in back in that period, like around 2000 responded to the rise of the internet and file sharing and all of that with DRM (digital rights management), which really did police your reading in a new way, right? In a way that didn't even exist before, as Lessig put it, it changed consumption patterns behind your back. And while that was true, what these startups were doing, and now empires like Meta and Google were that was the exact same thing with your data, right? They were just pointing to the previous generation of media empires that were trying to securitize their properties while you were trying to enjoy them.

John Plotz

So, Aarthi, as is often the case, I've detoured you here, and you're still laying out your main claims. I could give you lines that I thought of from the book, but maybe one place to invite you to say more is like you say in terms of the intervention "I wrote this book to respond to decline narratives about literature and literary study, and to offer an alternative to the prevailing sense of defeat and nostalgia that guides them" and I think that nostalgia topic is maybe a nice one that we've already unpacked. But can you maybe say more about your yeah your intervention in that way?

Aarthi Vadde

Yeah, when I hear conversations around literature, they are almost always in the key of doom, and so the large story that's being discussed right now is that students can't read; they won't read, and we have to lower our standards constantly to meet them where they are. And I feel like this is a narrative that, in some ways, speaks to the choir, preaches to the choir of beleaguered humanists, but it's also a narrative that I'm just tired of hearing, and I think comes from the purposeful ignoring of places where we have seen students read and write with a level of glee. And I'm not saying they should all do that in the classroom. I don't think fanfic is the future or anything like that. But to ignore the forms of literacy that develop online and call them forms of illiteracy is, I think, a problem in this narrative. So Gen Z, the younger folks, are on places like Wattpad. The YouTube for stories is their tagline. I'm not trying to claim that they're they have you know they have some sort of interest in

cultivating young people. They don't. They have no interest in cultivating young people, and I just think that this is a place where students I know jokingly embarrassed embarrassed about it say, "Oh, I read, I write, I can't share anything here." But this is where that happens, and I've actually had very good students from the grads, my grad students and my undergrads. When I ask where did you learn to write, they're like, "Oh, I was an editor on my fan forum, or "I just published something and then I started helping other people write." And so there are these groups that sort of organically live online that have very little cultural capital or respect associated with them, and the students themselves think are probably not worth telling their professors about. And I was like, "What do we do with those forms of literacy?" I because I don't want to call them illiteracy. I feel like maybe they're not trained in how we read, but building the link between those environments and our more institutionalized environments to me seems more worthwhile than just denigrating.

John Plotz

Yeah, one of the claims you made that I really that I underlined the first time I read this is the desire to we have there's a fallacious nostalgic belief that "the desire to read should precede desire to write and. That students streaming into English departments for creative writing at the expense of reading Shakespeare and James Joyce are a proof of the topsy-turvyness of the discipline in distress." And I guess we should say instead of streaming into the department, maybe they're not. Maybe they're streaming onto Wattpad. But the point seems to be the same, right? Which is why are we locked into a mistaken model of the precedents of the desire to read before the desire to write?

Aarthi Vadde

I do think that it's an inherited model, and it's one that casts students whose desire to write precedes their desire to read as, in some way, narcissistic, right? And I think that there's plenty of. I just saw. I don't remember where who wrote it, but I just saw somebody kind of bemoaning the fact that students don't want to be influenced. That's why they don't read. They want to just maintain their own voice. While that can be the end of the conversation and the kind of thing that you complain about with your colleagues, to me, that orientation is the starting point, right? It's not the end point, right? Everything like oh, here's the end of literature if they think this way, and I'm like, no, that's the new starting point for literature. Yeah, and I think you can educate them into not feeling that way and to understanding influence as something outside of what they're calling it, but it's not the end; it's the beginning.

John Plotz

Not to get too sociological about this, but you probably have the same experience that I do of dissuading people from becoming graduate students in English. People still show up in graduate school. I love having them. I love teaching them. But by and large, if somebody asks you if they should do it. We tell them no nowadays, right? Because the field is imploding. Do you think there's something related to that? Because in the old days, if you fell in love with 19th-century poetry, someone would say to you, would pat you on the head and say, "Okay, there, don't worry, you can go off and be an English professor." Right. But who wouldn't say that to anybody now? It seems like there's so many things that people could say are definitive of the humanities, but one of the nostalgic forms is that reading and passive-not canonical, maybe, but just like passive consumption and appreciation in a Matthew Arnold sense, like that's the paradigm of what it means to do humanistic thinking. But why should that be the paradigm? Actually, why couldn't the paradigm be in creation as much as it is in suitably critical reading?

Aarthi Vadde

I do think that's right. In some ways, in light of the the large backlash against AI, especially among young people who are watching or fearing even more jobs disappearing, you can make the case for the version of the humanities as completely unplugged from any kind of digital infrastructure, a physical book in hand, and rebuilding your attention. I feel like that is one strategy for the humanities that, in this moment, might be deeply successful. But I tend to I tend to think of English departments as multi-front battles, right? You can have that AI free space, or you can dub it the AI free space and do traditional humanities and teach the gorgeous beauty of close reading, which I practice, I hope. Yeah, but when it comes to the writing of it, I think we can have a different orientation towards what it means to write about books, and where, and we can ask, what is the gateway to literature? Is it the canon, or does something else bring you to us?

John Plotz

I really like the paradigm of the multi front space, just because I was talking about this with somebody yesterday. About there are other smaller humanities disciplines, and I always think of Donna Tartt's novel **Secret History** because I think, oh yeah, the thriving classics department. You don't need to know there was a moon landing. You could all just sit around and read Tacitus together, and that is one front on which we should fight. But I completely agree that English is a little bit more like an empire than it is like an island republic. It needs to be fighting in various ways. But so apropos of that, Aarthi can I invite you to just talk more about your chapters?

Because you go in so many different directions. I really want to talk about your work with emoji and the innate viscosity that lies so close to the surface of letters, like the relationship between letters and visual images, and how certain phenomena that you see happening nowadays are blurring those boundaries in interesting ways.

Aarthi Vadde

Yeah. No, that's chapter five, which I'm happy to talk about. Maybe for the sake of sequence, I'll just tell the order of the chapters. So I feel like what I tried to do in this book is write a near history, and I wanted to narrate the history of Web 2.0 from about 2004 to the present via my engagement with some of the kind of foundational writing of that business model and cultural movement, and how writers themselves responded to it over 2008 to the present. So the first chapter after the introduction really returns to the rhetorical moves of Web 2.0 folks like Tim O'Reilly, Lessig, and how they defeated the free software movement started by Richard Stallman and found a way to make information free as a kind of cyber libertarian mantra. Try to take it out of the socialist idea of collective governance of information and just make it about companies being able to circulate cultural materials at maximum speed. So that kind of sets up the what I call the "internet culture framework" that is eclipsing print culture as the substrate from which literature arises and is made, and the subsequent chapters are about how contemporary writers themselves have negotiated the power structures of the internet and also engaged with the writing they find online, like mass writing and even participate in mass writing. So I start from what I think of as the beginning of this, which is Jonathan Lethem's interactions with Lessig in his essay "Ecstasy of Influence," and then I go forward. So I look at writers who think about how some of these ideas of circulation have been commodified and monetized. Like that's Euler's work. I look at writers who try to escape that (Stuart Holm, this kind of avant-garde provocateur) and then I also move into this what I call the center of the literary field in a subsequent chapter, where I look at celebrity writers like Jennifer Egan, Teja Cole, and Margaret Atwood and Naomi Alderman and talk about how they basically go online, interact with the crowd, develop new styles of writing as a result, and that feeds back into what we think of as their major contemporary novels, whether that's *The Candy House* or *Tremor* by Cole or *The Testaments* or *The Power*. Those are Atwood and Alderman, respectively, and then I get into as you're interested.

John Plotz

Oh, sorry, I want to get to that also. But yeah, can you say one word more about Atwood? Because I'd love to think about that example. Yeah, like how does the *Testaments* get shaped by that? Yeah.

Aarthi Vadde

So the Testaments is a great example. So that won the Booker Prize. It was tied with Evaristo Girl, Woman, Other. And anyway, that novel is a sequel to The Handmaid's Tale. Atwood is in some ways like the literary face of the Me Too movement. She has really commanded a popular presence while also being a highly prestigious writer. And I think that there's a way to read the Testaments which is entirely continuous with Atwood's career, which is a portrait of the patriarchy and how women are entrapped within it and imagining the escape through words and literature. But when I read and thought about that book in light of Atwood's deeply non-respectable engagement with Wattpad (She endorsed the platform. She did a lot of work for the platform in the 2010s, including authoring with Naomi Alderman on it) I realized that in a way, she was trying to recruit young people into literature, and she was going where they were. And I reread the Testaments, and of course, it's a feminist dystopia, but I reread it through the kinds of complexities of democratization and information access. So I think that's a different angle on the book than is ordinarily developed or discussed.

John Plotz

Great. I think you're about to get to chapter five.

Aarthi Vadde

Yes. So chapter five is my experimental chapter on the intersection of literature and conceptual art. So I really wanted to talk about the relationship between text and image in Xu Bing's work, Book from the Ground, and I also discuss Fred Bennison's Emoji Dick. And to me, this chapter is all about what it means to read and look at books in the age of the internet. By the time that when these books were initially published around 2008 10 period, I think there was a lot of optimism still around the idea that the internet would be an amazing engine of communication and connection, or it would make, like in Bennison's case, really complex projects easy and doable without a lot of resources. And in the course of reading both those writers and artists' statements and the books themselves, I felt like they were allegories of reading and interpretation, and they were also completed in the language of the digital vernacular, so emoji, right? Images that are also ways of communicating emotion in an environment that seems pretty toneless, right? Like print, informal, and how basically how informal writing develops its own tools for conveying things that just didn't exist in the print world,

John Plotz

And then so just to start with the easy easier access, the way that I came to know it through Lisa Giddleman's work on Emoji Dick. that is literally a version of a Moby Dick done in emojis. Yeah, Through the use of Mechanical Turk, right? That's

Aarthi Vadde

Yeah, yeah. The procedure of making that book, I feel like Bennison used to work at Kickstarter, and I think he is also associated with the Creative Commons movement, and so it was in it was a way of promoting this idea of circumventing institutions, right? So Emoji Dick was not particularly about Moby Dick. It was particularly about showing the capacities of platforms to make impossible projects easy, or at least easier. I do read it as an example of drinking the Kool Aid and basically modeling an exploitative labor system as this kind of great project, which is a Hertzog, it's like a comic version of a Hertzog attempt to do something grand and have it just reveal all the problems, which is how I see the the icon novel too. You want to do something grandly encyclopedic, and at the same time as when you're trying to do this aggregative work, you end up revealing all the things that make it impossible to be positive about this aggregative work. So I say that this is an example of how the dream of the internet becomes the nightmare of the internet. Yeah, you want to communicate, but you are travestying communication.

John Plotz

Yeah. So speaking of the travesty of communication, can we just can we unpack a couple of different dimensions of the what it would mean to write an emoji based work? One is, could you talk to us a little bit about the category of the asemic, like the writing that looks like writing but isn't, and then also for some reason, I'm sorry, I wrote this word down, but I can't find it. But the like the notion of a it's not pansemic, but the notion of yeah, pasographic. Yeah, tell us about the pasographic and the asemic, and I think that will give us great grounds for your point about whether this is presenting some kind of magical Rosetta Stone or whether it's more like parroting the impossibility of translation or translatability.

Aarthi Vadde

Yeah, so the asemic writing movement is actually one I learned about via Rita Rayley's work, but it basically is called draw writing. That's another way to think about it. It's inscriptions without meaning, hence asemic, asymptomatic. And when people look at it, they think it looks like writing, but there's no meaning attached to it, and so that's a form that has, I think, taken off in internet culture, even though it's much older than that, because it's a way of reflecting on that people are looking at visual images and not reading online. And another angle is, and this I think, was

partly, even though Gitelman doesn't use the asemic, this is partly her argument that when you read online, there's so much you don't see beneath the screen, right? That there is the entire infrastructure of code, of protocols, of all of these things that are just inaccessible to you in a way that reading a book doesn't replicate. And so, how do we think about the parts of the internet that are enclosed when we are always being reminded by our tech overlords that everything is open and accessible and blah blah blah? When that's not quite the case, so asemic as a form gives us a handle on that relationship between seeing and not seeing, reading and not reading, and then pasigraphic pasigraphy was the word I learned in the course of writing this book, which I'm always really grateful when I learn a new word. Like when I wrote chimeras, the new word I learned was autarchy, and on this book it was pasigraphy.

John Plotz

Pasigraphy, I love it. Yeah,

Aarthi Vadde

and that is writing in a universal way, or writing that can be universally understood. And I was like, "How is that even a word? Like, how? Whoever thought that would be possible?" But of course, there there were, as I discovered through writing this, there are all of these attempts to produce a language, especially in the early 20th century, that is highly rationalized and quote unquote perfect, right? Yeah, yeah. It's a

John Plotz

big science fiction trope.

Aarthi Vadde

huge yes. Umberto Eco's written books about this. It's a whole industry. And once I found the word, I was like, oh, this describes a whole universe.

John Plotz

But then, isn't there a pasigraphy connection to the origins of emojis themselves? Isn't that right? Isn't there something about Olympic for the Tokyo Olympics, they were trying to come up with systems of communication.

Aarthi Vadde

That's exactly right. So when we go back to attempts at universal language that were more pictorial, the Olympics in Japan was one major source for the kinds of icons that they felt would be understandable by people who. Wouldn't speak Japanese,

and so that was one inspiration for the first designer of emoji, Kurita. Another inspiration was manga visual symbols like the tears that you might see in manga to suggest anxiety or stress, and he really mixes up alphabetical language and pictorial language. And he says, "I wanted this to be a keyboard of images that resembled an alphabet" and so I think where perhaps locating language in non-European languages is really helpful in thinking about emojis and thinking about the relationship between picture and image, image and word, and how characters are written in Japan versus like how we construct letters, so I'm not saying it's a pictorial language, but I think that word and image aren't divided in the same kind of biblical way that they are in European languages.

John Plotz

Can you just say more, Aarthi? I think because it feels like the the asemic and the pasographic there both are about proximity between word and image, but they kind of go in different directions because the asemic goes towards the disintegration of the possibility of legibility, and the pasigraphic is almost like super writing or something.

Aarthi Vadde

Like yeah, trying to achieve that universality. Yeah, and Xu Bin was definitely in the pasographic mode when he tried to write book from the ground. He was collecting airport cards with those visual that are basically all in visuals, and he was like, "Here are all these things I see in spaces of global capital, like the Olympic Village or the airport, where there's so many ways of communicating through basically picture signs. And I thought, could I have this novel that I wrote entirely out of these signs, and the answer is that no, you can't tell a complex story through visual images unless the complex story is about the relationship between text and picture. You're not going to have a story with characters and psychology. You're going to have a story about systems. Yeah, so that's what makes it conceptual art and not a novel, and the way that we think about it.

John Plotz

Unless I miss something, and I probably did, I don't think you talk about how comics work, the Scott McCloud stuff, but it seems related, right? He's so acutely aware, and so like he says, every comic writer is thinking about that tension between is this line that I've drawn tending towards being a letter or tending towards being an image.

Aarthi Vadde

That's really helpful to think about. I did research wordless novels from the 1930's.

John Plotz

Oh, those are great!

Aarthi Vadde

Yeah, like the woodcuts,

John Plotz

God's man, the woodcuts. Yeah,

Aarthi Vadde

yeah, yeah. German Expressionism. I think some, and they're just gorgeous, and they're emotional, and they yeah are.

John Plotz

But they come out of a comic background too. All those people had seen newspaper comics before they wrote them. Yeah,

Aarthi Vadde

yeah, exactly. And when I've talked about those novels with people and something like *Emoji Dick* and *Book from the Ground*, I think the immediate response is those are expressive. You can see the sign of the writer's hand or the drawer's hand in the strokes, whereas this is so standardized, right? Emojis are standardized pictorial, and that pictorial images. The way that the page is arranged in these books is linear. It's not through comic frames. Yeah, things don't break the frame. They're making painstaking attempts to reproduce the look of the literary is what I call it, and building on Johanna Drucker's work, right? Making it look hyper standardized, as though there were no mark of a person's hand.

John Plotz

Yeah, and so that maybe would be a good pivot point for you to talk about your-is it your final chapter or your epilogue? The sort of writing.

Aarthi Vadde

Yeah, it's a long epilogue. I feel like it could potentially be a chapter, but yeah, yeah. So I called that writer's hand at a distance because I really wanted to engage,

John Plotz

And that's a wonderful phrase, by the way. It's like your phrase, right? You're quoting. No, I. You're building. Okay, yeah.

Aarthi Vadde

On the artist's hand at a distance, which is a phrase of John Roberts, whose artist

John Plotz

whose work I didn't know, but that's yeah.

Aarthi Vadde

I recommend his work, *Intangibilities of Form*, where he basically talked about art after the ready-made, so Duchamp's ready-made, and I sometimes think, having read more art history and criticism to write Chapter Five on the emoji novel and the epilog, that maybe the ready-made just broke through more in for art critics, and someone like Joyce's *Ulysses* broke through because there people just believe that they cannot go back. Right? How do you talk about the right the artist's skill after the ready-made? That's what the Roberts book is all about. And I feel like in literature, many of us are like, "Oh yeah, that was a high point of experimentalism, and then realism came back, and beautiful prose came back, and blah blah blah. But they're like, "No, you can't go back. Ready-made makes it impossible to paint a picture again and pretend it's groundbreaking.

John Plotz

Can I just say Aarthi, I love that comparison because I read a book in graduate school called *Art After Duchamp*, which is so much to that point. And I, how you framed it- the notion of artisanal expertise just goes out the window once you can put a urinal up on a wall and call it art, as opposed to- and this is me speaking as a Victorianist now, spending my entire career struggling against the notion that modernism did change something, not just fundamentally but irrevocably. Because I completely agree that Joyce changes something fundamentally. But then I feel like I, growing up in the '90s and the 2000s, there's just decade after decade of literary criticism that was predicated on the notion that it wasn't just a fundamental but an irrevocable break. Whereas everything that I saw about literature made me think it wasn't irrevocable at all. It was like constantly pivoting

Aarthi Vadde

Literature is a we're a small market, but at least we're a bigger market than art, and so it's very important that we can sustain multiple styles of literature. But in that particular epilogue, I was really- I thought it was very important to remind people

that even though we're living through what feels like an unprecedented disruption with generative AI, that the arrival of those technologies in their current form are the culmination of a Web 2.0 model, not a radical break from it. And so, this is-it might be the end of Web 2.0, as it's hard to declare the end of a historical period so close to when it started. But it might lead to a different kind of business model powering the internet, since it's crushing the current business model of the internet, this training data model. But for the purposes of my epilogue, it is the culmination of this movement that I have been articulating over the course of the book, and I wanted to show a cross-section of writers. I would say were early adopters of GPT three before the release of ChatGPT, not for reasons of efficiency, but for reasons of artistry, and for reflection on what felt like a deeply scary time and moment for professional writers. And so I look at what I call writers' hand at a distance works like Megan O'Gieblyn's *Babel*, Sheila Heti's *Hello World*, Vauhina Vara's *Ghosts*, to show how writers are maintaining a commitment to what I would call experimental writing, while at the same time engaging the power dynamics that are befalling them with the arrival of this automation tool,

John Plotz

Can I connect that to something you say? And this, this is something you and I, and basically all the people who work on Novel Dialogue together, we like to talk about in our AI assisted Slack channel. We like to think about what exactly we are nostalgic for in this moment, and I think Shila Heti is a great example for us to land on because she's so wonderful at both exploring but also indulging in our nostalgia for the authentically human. Heti has such a like a richly redolent sense of oh, what does it mean to be an artist to be part of a generation of artists? But she's also so acute about why don't I just train a chatbot and see if I can make it through that? But you have a phrase that maybe you could unpack for us. You said that "one of the places we are now that we have to be cognizant of and be and interrogate ourselves about is a repulsion towards AI that goes beyond. I can't remember whether that is, but that goes beyond to a space where some prettyfied version of writing becomes synonymous with being human."

Aarthi Vadde

Oh, purified.

John Plotz

Purified. Thanks for the correction. That was an autocorrect. Yeah, purified version. Yeah. Yeah. Some purified version of writing becomes synonymous with being human.

Aarthi Vadde

Right. I think the history of writing is also the history of writing technologies, and what newer technologies do is help you forget the technologies that were old, right? And so this is a particularly extractive technology. This depends on other people's data, which is a, I think, a phase change from the platform, which monetized the collection of data, but didn't depend on it to produce its own output. But what I'm saying is, you can reject AI on the grounds that most people are rejecting it out loud, which is to say, as a label, as a profound kind of cultural theft. But what I think is inspiring a revulsion that I would question is this sentimental reaction to what human being is that we didn't used to have a couple years ago.

John Plotz

And so, just to play out the technology point, you don't need to go all the way back to Plato and the discovery of writing, but the sort of the logic of remediation that each technology produces: a set of kind of logical affordances. So unpack it. I don't know where do you want to go with like the printing press or mass publishing or something. There are things that can be expressed more easily, thoughts that can be developed more readily, and that doesn't constitute the human necessarily. It constitutes like a capacity of being a human with these technologies at your disposal.

Aarthi Vadde

Exactly. If you think about the printing press making distribution and copying just way easier and faster than scribal culture, I don't know that if we looked at that moment we would start fetishizing handwriting because we're not afraid of the printing press, right? Yeah. So yes, there's this tendency to equate the soul with handwriting on some level, and in fact, you even see that in I think commodified Instagram poetry.

John Plotz

Can I just give you? Oh That's a great example. Let's come back to. Yeah, I just want to give you one data point about the whether we fetishized handwriting. So when the original movable type, the Gutenberg era, clearly was influenced by scribal writing. They used monastic letters to form their letters. Nobody thought about that at all. But in the 1890s, when William Morris is deeply worried by the kind of acceleration of printing presses, the way that you can just print things so much faster and so much cheaper. He basically goes around giving a series of lectures in which he emphasizes, but the original printing presses really were more

handwriting like. So, in other words, he's going to reclaim that artist's hand. I guess you would say, in a way that's true and untrue at the same time. But it is what he's emphasizing. So, in other words, I do. I wouldn't be surprised if there's a wave of the kind of nostalgic authenticity seeking that you're describing that occurs with every new technological innovation.

Aarthi Vadde

Yeah, and in that sense, I don't think we're in an unprecedented moment in terms of reaction and response. Every time something speeds up or seems to change the rules of the game. We want to go back to a previous time where we knew the rules and could draw clear boundaries around the machine and us, right? But I think writing, there is something in inhuman and standardized about writing because if it were entirely personal, you wouldn't communicate it to someone else, right?. But my other kind of theory of what writing is, as a kind of exteriority of memory going back to Plato, is that there is this sense that the more we give over or outsource, the less we as human beings can protect our own intellect. And I think that's the large conversation around AI that needs to be happening, and I'm glad is happening, right? If you are allowing it to do certain things, what is your argument for allowing it to do those things for you? And what I really wanted to emphasize about the writing that I interpret in the epilogue is that it's not, to my mind, in any way labor-saving device. They're not using GPT-3 to save them time. They've repurposed it for the sake of making something that hadn't artistically that I think hadn't really existed before. There's been generated poetry and there's been machine-enabled constraint-based writing, but what does it mean to mix synthetic output with your own originated writing, and then reflect on the status of a mind that has been shaped by other minds and by the crowd in a way that's far more in some ways literal on the page when you see the writing of the crowd via synthetic output? Montaigne might talk about his meditations and his response to the social forces around him, but he wouldn't have been able to marshal that kind of passage-the actual distillation of all of these voices. Sure, an extractive model, but still,

John Plotz

Again, I get the import of your writer's hand at a distance. There, there is something about it's needing to navigate through those layers of not remediation, yeah, technological mediation on mediation. That's the real work is to make sense of that, and also, and maybe this goes back to the the problem of the unacknowledged aspects of AI in our daily lives. Do you know Meredith Martin's new book about poetry date? Poetry's data exactly. And I think part of her point. I'm going to paraphrase it and get it terribly wrong. But I mean, part of her point is we claim to

be exempted from these conditions of production. But if you look at actual citational practices and actual referential work of any scholar in the humanities, we're completely immersed in that is the river we're swimming in. Even though we pretend we give the people a page number for our citation, but come on, that's bullshit. she just wants you to admit the yeah admit the price of. Okay, I was thinking of this before. I think maybe I'll ask your thoughts about it. But do you remember at the end of Modern Times, Charlie Chaplin actually sings? Do you remember there's like a song that comes on in the restaurant, but it's babble. It's not actually language. So Chaplin, the silent actor, is performing speech, but the speech is like bubububu It's asemic in that sense. So I wonder, yeah, I don't know if something about what he's doing is slowing us up and making us admit. Yeah. Oh, you're a tool of this technology. You might not admit it, but here you are.

Aarthi Vadde

Glitching, noise, all of these techniques are important parts of the history of tactical media and glitch art to slow down the signal to slow down the machine. The writer's hand at distance, I also say, operates the machine counterproductively. So if the machine is the chatbot, then turn it against its purpose. That's what art has historically done to comment on society. So I think you're absolutely right that we should be resisting literature's automation, but I don't think that the the only way to resist literature's automation is to go down the road of a kind of fetishizing of an earlier organic sphere of production. Is how I put it in the book.

John Plotz

Aarthi, this is great. We could obviously continue indefinitely, and I just I want to make sure that people go off and read *We the Platform* how the Internet Changed 21st Century Literature. I don't think I read that subtitle before, but maybe this is a good moment to ask you to recommend a "recallable book," which is a book that if people enjoyed this conversation, they might also find was worth reading.

Aarthi Vadde

Yes, so I'm going to recall Elizabeth Eisenstein's "printing press as an agent of change." Yeah, which is an oldie but a goodie, and I think deeply controversial within the historian community. I'll add to that recallable book, a recallable debate between Eisenstein and Adrian Johnson in the *American Historical Review*.

John Plotz

Oh, great! I've never read that. That's amazing. I think of them as from two different generations.

Aarthi Vadde

They are, and they-it was an intergenerational meeting of the mind. Yeah, where John's, I think, his book had come out and had, in some ways, I think, represented a break from the Eisenstein perspective, but the Eisenstein perspective was such a huge shadow over print culture and print and history of media, and so they had it out in a very civil way that you would never see anymore. Over 20 pages of print.

John Plotz

Oh, that's great! I will post the links to that. That's fantastic.

Aarthi Vadde

I think it's good if you are interested in wanting to understand the moment we're in as one of in what feels like the kind of intense change in which there's uneven timescales, people unevenly adopting things and holding worldviews that are steeply diametrically opposed. Yeah, yeah. It's the only book I've read recently that I felt gives me some purchase on what is happening around me right now.

John Plotz

That's fantastic. I I've actually been meaning for ages to just mention this isn't my recallable book, but that Mary Poovey book, *Uneven Developments*. I think about that all the time because her point is precisely about the unevenness. We have to get away from that Foucauldian smoothness of the epistemic break. First, we were one thing, and then we were another. And Gaston and Gallison have a wonderful model of "succeeding epistemic virtues." But I think Poovey really puts her finger on it, and she's no, it's uneven, and you cannot expect it all to be one thing. You just have to keep an eye for how the different threads do and don't cohere.

Aarthi Vadde

It's such a hard task to try to do that too. As an academic who wants to write about the present, like how do you keep in mind all the competing points of view that result from the uneven adoption of different claims around this? Like right now, AI technology.

John Plotz

No, that's that's wonderfully put. I totally agree. So, actually, speaking of competing claims, I want to recommend for my very quick recallable book is someone we had on the show last year, Ben Mangrum, released the book *"Comedy of Computation"* or *"How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Obsolescence"*. And just for a specific

aspect, which I think probably is in your spirit and your wheelhouse, but he's really interested in the sight of the kind of human knowledge worker facing their own obsolescence. In other words, we've been living in the industrial age for a long time, but every once in a while, the mind based disciplines, the knowledge worker based disciplines, say being a professor, being a lawyer, things like that, being a Hollywood screenwriter, they come under particular fire, and that produces a certain kind of literary response. And so, Comedy of Computation is one of the books that documents those. And I think the final chapter of your book is really wonderful at thinking about how writers are not freaking out nostalgically necessarily, but responding under pressure to this threat. Yeah,

Aarthi Vadde

I think that's right, and I know Ben's book, and it yes, I think they're good pairing for sure.

John Plotz

Excellent. Maybe we can get people to sell them at a discount if you buy them together. Yeah,

Aarthi Vadde

I hesitate to say that we might be part of the same recommendation algorithm, but oh yeah,

John Plotz

yeah, maybe that's right.

Aarthi Vadde

You like this, you might like that.

John Plotz

Yeah, we didn't talk about curation at all. That's part of the story. Yeah. Okay Aarthi Thank you so much. It's pleasure as always, and a wonderful discussion. Wonderful book with a platform, and yeah, and thank you, and listeners, thank you for joining us.

Aarthi Vadde

Thank you.