

Cyborg Storytelling: Virtual Embodiment in Jennifer Egan's "Black Box"

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“Beauty brings copies of itself into being.” –Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just*

On May 23, 2012, *The New Yorker* announced that it would begin tweeting Jennifer Egan’s story “Black Box” in ten nightly installments, one tweet per minute from 8 to 9 P.M. Eastern time each night. Carrying the excitement of a major broadcast or awards ceremony, the story took on the aura of a newsworthy event. Headlines like *NPR*’s “Author’s Tweets Give New Meaning to Short Fiction” and *Wired*’s “Let’s Hope Jennifer Egan’s Twitter Story Heralds the Return of Serial Fiction” reveal the anticipation that built up around the Pulitzer-Prize winning author’s use of an unconventional digital medium. *Time* magazine reported, “unlike other books that have been broken up into tiny Twitter-digestible chunks, this work of fiction’s dramatic arc is supposed to take advantage of the medium.” Yoking this popular social network with the prestigious names of both Egan and *The New Yorker*, “Black Box” set high expectations for reimagining the capacities of a digital medium that might otherwise be characterized by its fleeting, informal, and unserious modes of communication. As *Fast Company* noted, the buzz also centered around engagement of the medium as a site for content generation rather than merely filtration and commentary: “Instead of using the platform to discuss a television program, a speech, or a news event occurring elsewhere, users tuned into something occurring on the platform itself. Twitter became not a second screen, but a first screen.”

Ironically, the medium that elevated excitement around the story’s publication ended up being the cause of its most biting critiques. Disappointed reviewers decried the story’s lack of engagement with many of Twitter’s distinctive features, asking why the author used the @NYerFiction Twitter-handle rather than create a fictional account for the narrator herself. Or why the story conformed to a strict, orderly pattern for releasing the tweets—one per minute for an hour—rather than pacing them in time with the narrator’s actual thoughts and experience. The

general consensus post-publication centered around a missed opportunity to engage Twitter's real-time network of connections,<sup>1</sup> leaving critics to wonder, why tell this story through Twitter at all? But this focus on whether the story used Twitter's features effectively or not has obscured its bearing on larger questions related to storytelling and humanist inquiry in the digital age.

This paper examines "Black Box"'s relevance to evolving concerns on the contemporary literary and cultural scene, including theories of new humanism, the role of narrative integrity in increasingly fragmented media landscapes, and renewed interest in the value of beauty and aesthetics as an ethical dimension of art. I see "Black Box" as an integral node in the recent theoretical turn toward more capacious understandings of what it means to be human today, particularly in theories of new humanism and the posthuman. Edward Said's *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*, for example, defines a new humanism at the turn of the twenty-first century as "a means of questioning, upsetting, and reformulating so much of what is presented to us as commodified, packaged, uncontroversial, and uncritically codified certainties" (28)—a reaction to the oppressive homogeneity that marked notions of humanism in the past.

"Black Box" challenges restrictive definitions of the human through its protagonist, a female cyborg spy who inevitably calls to mind Donna Haraway's classic 1984 essay, "A Cyborg Manifesto." In this essay, Haraway disrupts foundationalist views of the human by embracing a dualistic vision that the cyborg's hybrid state makes possible:

From one perspective, a cyborg world is about the final imposition of a grid of control on the planet, about the final abstraction embodied in a Star Wars apocalypse waged in the name of defense, about the final appropriation of

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<sup>1</sup> Katy Waldman of *Slate* memorably described the effect of the story as "a delicate literary soufflé that crumbled in on itself. Egan's beautifully composed tweets were like foreign travelers who had no idea where they'd turned up." Lisa Gee also articulates a number of these criticism in her *Independent* piece "Black Box, by Jennifer Egan: The Spy Story with 140 Characters."

women's bodies in a masculinist orgy of war. From another perspective, a cyborg world might be about lived social and bodily realities in which people are not afraid of their joint kinship with animals and machines, not afraid of permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints. (15, reference omitted)

Egan's figure of a technologically modified female heroine in "Black Box" is reminiscent of both aspects of Haraway's cyborg. On the one hand, the protagonist encapsulates a dystopic future world at war where women's bodies are employed as weapons of defense. On the other hand, her temporary cyborg existence (she is only outfitted with technology for the length of her military service) represents a productive synergy with technology that also makes apparent deeper recesses of human power that technological add-ons can neither fully eradicate nor rival.

The ambiguity inherent in such a cyborg figure is reminiscent of Judith Butler's recent ethical turn toward a new humanist approach founded on ideas of corporeal vulnerability and precariousness. Ann C. Murphy describes the "humanistic ethic" of Butler's recent work as "grounded in the reality that all human bodies are vulnerable to both violence and care" while also recognizing that "each unique body will live its vulnerabilities differently" (578). This focus on the precarity of human life and the limitless range of responses to that precarity disrupts notions of a "closed or hermetic understanding of what it means to be human" while still recognizing the universality of corporeal existence. The narrator of "Black Box" evokes such contradictions: her cyborg body at once challenges "closed or hermetic understanding[s]" of the human while also underscoring a persistent human vulnerability despite (or perhaps because of) its integration with technology.

In addition to its cyborg narrator-protagonist, "Black Box" examines the ethics of a new humanism through the narrative itself. Entering into a reflexive relationship with the story it tells,

“Black Box” connects narrative form with ethical instruction by calling into question the value of didactic information as compared to multi-dimensional human stories. Narrative, invested as it is in the pathos and contingency of human experience, has much to contribute to a cultivation of a new humanist ethics. Unlike straightforward and unambiguous ethical maxims, narrative challenges preconceived notions by facilitating an unsettling confrontation with the complexity of human experience. It is fitting, then, for ethics and art to be considered in relation to each other, as in Kwame Anthony Appiah’s *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*. In this book, Appiah argues that sharing and discussing art “reinforces our common understanding, and the values we share...help[s] us decide not only what we feel about the characters but how we should act in the world” (29-30). He recognizes art—“Folktales, drama, opera, novels, short stories; biographies, histories, ethnographies; fiction or nonfiction; painting, music, sculpture, and dance”—as the mode in which “every human civilization...reveal[s] to us values we had not previously recognized or undermine[s] our commitment to values that we had settled into” (30), and unless we share these ever-evolving values with others “we cannot learn from one another what it is right to think and feel and do” making “conversation between us...pointless” (31). Like Kenneth Burke’s theory of “literature as equipment for living,” Appiah assigns art a central role in the ethical endeavor of shaping human lives; in fact, art proves the most effective means of disrupting essentializing notions of the human through its commitment to ambiguity as a site of ethical exploration rather than solution-based explanation

Elaine Scarry locates a catalyst for such ethical questioning in the experience of beauty. Interestingly, “Black Box” directly engages the concept of beauty by referring to the unnamed narrator and her fellow agents as “beauties,” a reference to the physical attractiveness required of their work. Though marginalized in a theoretical tradition that has long emphasized hermeneutics

and metaphysics, beauty is receiving renewed attention in the current critical landscape<sup>2</sup>. While “Black Box” invites scrutiny beyond its surface, the story itself engages questions of surface versus depth in its re-valuation of beauty in an age of digital technology. Specifically, it differentiates between superficial investments in physical beauty—epitomized in such digital phenomenon as the selfie—versus a more existential sense of beauty as an agent for expanding human consciousness. Notably, the process of discovery and renewal that beauty fuels aligns with the processes described by Said as necessary for maintaining an open, non-essentializing sense of the human.

The story’s resonance with beauty, narrative, and the human is heightened by its placement within a pervasive contemporary context that is rewiring the relationship between words and images in communication: social networks. If considered in relation to this context, “Black Box” emerges as a parable of reading, writing, and being in the age of digital media. The story’s dystopic future world, dependent on the bravery and sacrifice of beautiful cyborg women, refigures technological mediation of the self as a deeply political and ambiguously ethical act—one that seeks to combat large-scale systems of patriarchal power as well as more insidious hegemonies of a late-consumerist culture’s narcissistic celebration of self. In the process, “Black Box” suggests new modes of technological mediation that call for a deeper connection with notions of human integrity—both in lived experience and in the stories told about it. The ethical commitments of “Black Box” are enacted formally by the placement of a linear narrative within Twitter’s decontextualizing, fragmented network. This act poses a challenge to digital consumers: to keep the contents of “Black Box” whole through a rewiring of their distracted

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus’s introduction to “surface reading” in the 2009 special issue of *Representations* on “The Way We Read Now”: “In the last decade or so, we have been drawn to modes of reading that attend to the surfaces of texts rather than plumb their depths” (1-2).

online reading practices. Though lacking in the type of formal play we might expect from a Twitter story, “Black Box” engages with the medium at a deeper, more provocative level. It meets digital readers at one of their most distracted media sites and brings them into a reflexive relationship with their own modes of technological embodiment.

### **Black Boxes**

Egan has described her story as “a series of terse mental dispatches from a female spy of the future, working undercover by the Mediterranean Sea” (*The New Yorker*). The unnamed narrator, whom readers of Egan’s novels will recognize as Lulu from her 2011 *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, volunteers to serve as an undercover agent in an American quasi-military outfit. Her body has been technologically augmented by government scientists to function as a recording device and data storage machine. These cyborg “beauties,” as the undercover spies are ironically named, assimilate into the demimonde of other beautiful women who serve as the mistresses of organized criminals responsible for carrying out large-scale attacks on America. Once gaining access into the criminal inner sanctums, the agents collect data via their cyborg bodies, which are outfitted with recorders in the ears, cameras in the eyes, signal transmitters in the backs of knees, and plugs and ports for performing “Data Surges” of phones and other digital devices. If a beauty dies while undercover, the information inside her is designed to survive; whether dead or alive, the goal is to get the body to a “Geographic Hotspot” where government agents can retrieve the information-filled vessel.

Twitter’s formal currency of the tweet gives shape to Egan’s “terse mental dispatches,” which have garnered considerable praise for their poignant, aphoristic quality even while critical assessments largely focused on the story’s missed opportunities to engage the medium. Indeed, the fact that “Black Box” was republished as a more traditionally unified story in *The New*

*Yorker*, where it can be read in print or online in its entirety without the labor of scrolling through individual tweets, is evidence enough that the story does not necessarily depend on Twitter as a vehicle of delivery. This lack of engagement with Twitter’s “affordances,” to borrow a word from the field of design studies,<sup>3</sup> is especially apparent when compared to other Twitter fictions that make innovative use of the medium’s features. For example, in 2009, BBC Audiobooks America’s Twitter feed published a story co-authored by Neil Gaiman and the numerous denizens of the “Twitterverse” called “Hearts, Keys, and Puppetry.” The story started with a single tweet by the acclaimed fantasy author, but from there, readers were encouraged to tweet lines with a corresponding hashtag. *BBC* subsequently selected from the approximately 10,000 submissions to craft an 874-tweet work of fiction. Another novelist, Elliott Holt, made creative use of Twitter handles in a 2012 murder mystery, in which she created Twitter personas for three party guests whose feeds act as evidence for an investigation into a woman’s death. Users were encouraged to determine whether the death was a homicide, suicide, or accident and tweet their final verdicts. A third author, Teju Cole took advantage of Twitter’s retweet function in his 2014 story “Hafiz.” Cole wrote the story in advance and then assigned individual lines to followers in his Twitter network. These users tweeted their assigned lines from their own accounts, which Cole then retweeted to present the story in chronological order.<sup>4</sup>

While these stories engage the formal elements of Twitter for a more interactive and collaborative reading experience, the 2015 viral phenomenon “A Wild Weekend in Florida,” also known simply as #TheStory, engages the medium on the level of language and affect, using an

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<sup>3</sup> A term introduced to literary studies in Caroline Levine’s 2017 *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network*.

<sup>4</sup> This decision is rife with implications about the ways in which story order might be experimented with on Twitter. Consider, for example, if Cole retweeted the story according to their first appearance within the Twitter network, rather than in the order that he originally wrote the story. The social network’s formal elements present new orders of logic for conceiving of narrative time and chronology.



informal style more characteristic of the ways in which people actually communicate on Twitter, including abbreviations, slang, and emoji. The 148-tweet story narrates a supposedly true tale of the author Aziah “Zola” Wells’ experience travelling to Florida with a fellow stripper. Though Zola has since deleted it from her Twitter profile, the wild and unfiltered story drew considerable attention. In a *Rolling Stone* feature, David Kushner writes, “It reads like *Spring Breakers* meets *Pulp Fiction*, as told by Nicki Minaj,” and it garnered praise from the likes of *Selma* director Ava DuVernay, who commended its narrative elements of “Drama, humor, action, suspense, [and] character development” (Kushner). Unlike Cole’s claim that the medium of Twitter helped him to create “polished language...clean, simple sentences” that have been “carefully considered,” (*NPR*) the appeal of Zola’s story is rooted in its unrefined, stream-of-consciousness style.

Set against these examples, “Black Box” appears decidedly conventional in its engagement with the medium. It neither makes direct use of Twitter’s features nor does it employ an informal digital vernacular. As Nathalie Rothschild writes, “*Black Box* should be read *despite* having first appeared as a piece of twitterature” (*Spiked-Online*). And yet, Egan did craft “Black Box” with Twitter specifically in mind. In an interview with Zara Dinnen of *Post45*, Egan explains that the idea started “with a desire to use Twitter to create a serialized work of fiction.” The question that fueled her was, “how can I create work that *requires* such a structure, and can’t be written any other way?” How might we understand Egan’s claim that her story depends on Twitter when it does not directly engage any of the medium’s distinctive formal features beyond the epigrammatic prose that derives from the 140-character limit? Indeed, these powerful one-liners made the story supremely shareable, as users “liked” and retweeted single sentences that resonated on the level of language alone (for example, “Sunlight on bare skin can be as nourishing as food.” or “If you love someone with dark skin, white skin looks drained of

something vital” (85.3)<sup>5</sup>). And yet, “Black Box” is a story that demands to be read in its entirety, from beginning to end, in linear order, if one is to appreciate its full implications. Ironically, it is through these traditional storytelling techniques that “Black Box” engages the medium of Twitter most forcefully. Beyond being a social media event, “Black Box” is a story about the event of social media. Its formal innovation derives from its placement in a social media network—one that threatens to dismantle the traditional narrative conventions it relies upon.

The story’s thematic engagement of the medium it inhabits is apparent on numerous levels, but perhaps most immediately so in its central conceit of the black box. Read one way, the titular black box is simply the enhanced body of the woman, which will function much like a black box in an airplane—to preserve vital information meant to survive even if the carrier doesn’t. “Your physical person is our Black Box,” the narrator explains. “Without it, we have no record of what has happened on your mission” (95.38). Read another way, the heroine is like a black box in engineering, a device or system that can be understood based on its inputs and outputs without knowledge of its internal configurations. Seeing her as a black box in this sense relegates her to the role of transcriptionist and guide. We learn that her “mental dispatches” will serve as field instructions for incoming spies after her own mission is complete. These instructions transform inputs from the field into useful outputs without attention to the internal workings of her subjective consciousness. In fact, the narrator is specifically instructed to edit personal thoughts and desires out of her final transcription, a command that calls to mind a larger sociocultural disregard for women’s thoughts and ideas in favor of their domestic or biological functions. The focus on inputs and outputs also calls to mind the nature of online engagement, which, as computer scientist Jaron Lanier explained in a recent *NPR Ted Radio Hour* segment,

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<sup>5</sup> In this paper, citations from “Black Box” consist of the page and section numbers (respectively) of the story as it appears in its compiled, republished form in *The New Yorker*.

consists of “a lot of signals that are actually not real signals.” Lanier argues that the onslaught of “pseudo-detail” online replaces “the world of sense and hues and shades and the subtleties of nature that are ever-changing and infinitely deep” with “this world of little buttons and lights and treat dispensers... a curtailed, simplified world that seems complex just because having a lot of it... takes up our time, takes up our attention.” As we will see, “Black Box” interrogates different kinds of inputs and outputs in a world of technological mediation, inviting reassessment of the “information” or “knowledge” that emerges from the narrator as if from a black box.

By characterizing its tweeted sentences as field instructions that are “stored in a chip beneath [the narrator’s] hairline” and recorded by “mentally speak[ing] the thought, as if talking to yourself” (88.15), “Black Box” challenges readers to reflect on different orders of knowledge emerging from the narrator’s body—from straightforward survival techniques to more complex philosophical concerns. Though the spies are instructed to “Always filter your observations and experiences through the lens of their didactic value. Where stray or personal thoughts have intruded, you may delete them,” criteria for defining the “didactic” are problematized by the fact that stray personal thoughts often contribute to the narrator’s survival. While technological augmentation is essential to the data-capture requirements of the mission, actual survival in these high-threat situations often depends on knowledge and strategic action divorced from technology. In fact, as Amelia Precup notes in her article “The Posthuman Body in Jennifer Egan’s ‘Black Box,’” the cyborg narrator often handles her technological tools clumsily and ineffectively, “resulting in a farcical rendering of ‘cyborgization’” (177). The narrator’s most potent source of power in the end surprisingly arises from her own human capabilities. “Human beings are fiercely, primordially resilient” (93.28), the narrator dictates, and this resiliency is called upon during a perilous escape scene after the beauty’s cover has been blown. In this scene,

the beauty must defend herself from an armed criminal and his mate using martial arts skills—presumably part of her spy training—and a self-defense technique of last resort called the Primal Roar. The Primal Roar is only minimally augmented by technology and involves embodied, quasi-animalistic behavior:

When you find yourself cornered and outnumbered, you may unleash, as a last resort, your Primal Roar.

The Primal Roar is the human equivalent of an explosion, a sound that combines screaming, shrieking, and howling.

The Roar must be accompanied by facial contortions and frenetic body movement, suggesting a feral, unhinged state.

The Primal Roar must transform you from a beauty into a monster.

The goal is to horrify your opponent, the way trusted figures, turned evil, are horrifying in movies and in nightmares.

Deploy your camera flash repeatedly while Roaring. (95.38)

These primal instincts continue to serve a pivotal function as she flees the house while nursing a gun-shot wound to the shoulder. In this injured state, the narrator must identify a means of escape by sensing inconsistencies in her natural environment, and after successfully locating a hidden boat, she must “Slither between branches and board the boat; untie it and lower its motor into water” (96.41). Maneuvering the boat requires memories of “the lakes in upstate New York” (96.41) where she initially learned this manual skill. The weaponry she relies upon does not emerge from her technological armament, but rather, from “a wide, carefree smile.” “A smile is like a shield; it freezes your face into a mask of muscle that you can hide beyond” (96.41). In her most vulnerable moments, the narrator depends on these stores of learned human defenses,

leading her to the perhaps paradoxical understanding that “Human beings are superhuman” (97.42).

Though the narrator’s human strength is emphasized in these closing scenes, much of her functionality throughout the story requires a combination of human and machine traits, evoking a tradition of cyborg use within the military industrial complex. She is, above all else, a weapon of the state. However, the narrator also occupies a radical feminist position—a contemporary version of Haraway’s “cyborg myth” “about transgressed boundaries, potent fusions, and dangerous possibilities, which progressive people might explore as one part of needed political work” (14). The political power of the cyborg lies not in its evolutionary distance from the human, but rather, in its redefinition of what it means to be human: “Perhaps, ironically, we can learn from our fusions with animals and machines how not to be Man, the embodiment of Western logos,” Haraway writes. “From the point of view of pleasure in these potent and taboo fusions...there might indeed be a feminist science” (52). Egan too imagines a feminist science in “Black Box” that employs potent human fusions for vexed militaristic ends. The undercover work that the spies are outfitted to perform rides a fine line between necessary counter-defense in an unpredictable, post-9/11 world of global terrorism and nationalistic calls to duty that require a potentially dangerous subscription to grand narratives of transcendence and martyrdom—the kinds of narratives that often fuel terrorist activity rather than abate it.

This paradoxical figuration of the beauties’ service—blurring as it does categories of progressive and totalitarian politics—arises also in the “impossible combination of traits” needed to become a citizen-agent: “ironclad scruples and a willingness to violate them; An abiding love for your country and a willingness to consort with individuals who are working actively to destroy it; The instincts and intuition of experts, and the blank records and true freshness of

ingénues” (85.5). Though beauties only perform this patriotic service once, they do so at the risk of their own lives: not merely a risk embedded in the high possibility of death, but also in the high probability that the experience will forever change them. As the training warned, “We cannot promise that your lives will be exactly the same when you go back to them” (85.5). This threat to the beauty’s personal identity complicates Haraway’s cyborg politics as the challenge becomes not merely about dismantling dominant, essentialist notions of the human, but also preserving a current of humanity linked to personal desire and aspirations. While the beauties’ black box bodies record and store information collected from their Designated Mates, they simultaneously work to preserve that which is precious in their own lives—that which makes their lives worth fighting for in this highly precarious and at times demoralizing future. The narrator, for example, often reflects on her loving marriage, and reveals the fact that at 33, she has decided to volunteer now in anticipation of having children (suggesting a “superhuman” confluence that many women pursuing a family life and a career must balance). And yet, the narrator’s service is about more than preserving her own life; it also involves sacrificing her life for a higher purpose—one that puts her considerable aspirations to use beyond her career in the music industry, which consists of “fomenting musical trends.” Indeed, though no small value is linked to the “enclosed and joyful life” that the narrator has shared with her husband “since graduate school” (87.15) a twin impulse exists to fulfill a patriotic duty in accordance with what the story presents as the “new heroism,” where “the goal is to merge with something larger than yourself” (89.21).

In fact, this new heroism seems ideologically opposed to the precious individuality of human life that the narrator also values and hopes to preserve:

In the new heroism, the goal is to renounce the American fixation with being seen  
and recognized [and] dig beneath your shiny persona

You may accomplish astonishing personal feats, but citizen agents... liken the  
need for personal glory to cigarette addiction: a habit that feels life-sustaining  
even as it kills you

An enemy of the state could not have connived a better way to declaw and distract  
us.

Now our notorious narcissism is our camouflage. (91.21)

Addiction, narcissism, personal glory, erection of shiny personas—are these attacks not germane to a critique of the very social networks that Egan has chosen as a site for her story? In *Digital Modernism*, Jessica Pressman discusses a digital fiction's capacity to "promote media archaeology by initiating the excavation of an older technology in ways that demonstrate the literary work theorizing its own medial layers and encouraging the reader to do the same" (61). Beyond redefining western criteria for a masculine, lone-warrior heroism through evocation of a larger band of female heroines, "Black Box" also critiques the electronic media technology that frames these single heroic figures in such idolizing ways. The heroic figures of comics, film, and television that viewing publics once only engaged with from a distance have been incorporated into the new medial layers of social networks, giving people the tools to star as the protagonists of their own curated online worlds. Indeed, "Black Box" seems invested in a critique of social networks from the story's very first tweet: "People rarely look the way you expect them to, even when you've seen pictures" (85.1). A social media-savvy reader will relate to such a line, conjuring as it does the often-duplicitous world of online dating. Egan's self-reflexive opener suggests that her story about technologically augmented beauties working undercover to fight

threats to national security is also a story about the digital tools that we increasingly rely upon to filter ourselves to the world—a national security threat of a different order.

Marshall McLuhan's paradigm-shifting media theories are relevant to a discussion of "Black Box" and its simultaneous critique of and investment in the role of technology in filtering human lives. In *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, McLuhan resists the notion that media's only effects lie in their chosen uses. Glossing his famous adage "the medium is the message," McLuhan writes that the medium "shapes and controls the scale and form of human association and action...it is only too typical that the 'content' of any medium blinds us to the character of the medium" (9). Further, since the "spell" of media "can occur immediately upon contact, as in the first bars of a melody" (15), consumers must be vigilant, active participants, constantly questioning the ways in which new media affects our social and psychic relations. The impact of new media might not merely go unnoticed, but might also eventually begin to work counterintuitively. McLuhan theorizes this in the reversal of the overheated medium, or "break boundaries," defined by Kenneth Boulding as the point at which "the system suddenly changes into another or passes some point of no return in its dynamic process" (38). Mediums are especially susceptible to break boundaries in moments of "hybrid energy" wherein a new medium is introduced that replaces an existing medium, as in the current transition from analog to digital media. Such a break boundary might be diagnosed in the context of social media where Egan's story situates us, as the intention to connect often more forcefully separates, and access to seemingly endless tracts of information has landed us in a so-called "post-truth" society.

But these medial transitions are also potent sites for critical engagement, according to McLuhan: "The moment of the meeting of media is a moment of freedom and release from the ordinary trance and numbness imposed by them on our senses" (55). In its self-reflexive



approach, “Black Box” does more than merely critique its own medium, which might otherwise stop after lambasting the criminals’ harem of mistresses who vie for attention much in the same way social media users covet likes, shares, and comments. Instead, Egan moves beyond this negative critique and proposes new modes of productive technological inhabitation through the creation of a character who resembles the other beauties in the story, but is actually a citizen agent committed to fighting the high-fatality crimes that the other women turn a blind eye to. In fact, the citizen agents’ goal “to be both irresistible and invisible” transforms a feature common to women’s experience—impossible double standards—into a source of covert power. By casting irresistibility as a prerequisite for invisibility, Egan ironically weaponizes the misogynist practice of reducing women to sex objects. The story’s distinction between beauties who are merely the mistresses of criminals and undercover beauties who use their appearance as a disguise for covert action recalls the ironic political maneuver at the heart of Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, whose titular character must learn to use his socially constructed invisibility strategically.<sup>6</sup> In Ellison’s magnum opus, this strategic employment of invisibility is presaged by a painful process of coming into racial awareness. Though becoming aware of his racial oppression is painful, *Invisible Man*’s protagonist is nonetheless empowered by such knowledge, and becomes dually equipped in his state of heightened awareness to both more fully embody his socially marginalized state as well as wield it toward new radical ends.

The narrator of “Black Box” experiences a similar critical reflexivity of her body’s usefulness through the “Disassociation Technique,” which, when deployed, allows the beauty’s consciousness to temporarily leave her body. This technique is especially useful for coping with

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<sup>6</sup> Egan directly connects the struggles of women with those of racial minorities in her most recent novel *Manhattan Beach*, where the female protagonist and an African-American character each navigate an otherwise all-male, all-white group of divers at the Brooklyn Navy Yard by employing their social invisibility for tactical ends.

the traumatic sexual encounters that the job requires, such as when she must feign desire and pleasure when sexually propositioned by her Designated Mate on a cropping of rocks at a Mediterranean beach. Her field notes instruct:

Begin the Dissociation Technique only when physical violation is imminent.

Close your eyes and slowly count backward from ten.

With each number, imagine yourself rising out of your body and moving one step farther away from it.

By eight, you should be hovering just outside your skin.

By five, you should be floating a foot or two above your body, feeling only vague anxiety over what is about to happen to it.

By three, you should feel fully detached from your physical self.

By two, your body should be able to act and react without your participation.

By one, your mind should drift so free that you lose track of what is happening below. (86.8)

As in Ellison's *Invisible Man*, awareness of the narrator's position in a system of power relations determined by white male violence, influence, and money becomes too painful to directly experience at the level of the body. And yet, it is only through this bodily violation that the narrator is able to maintain her hidden power.<sup>7</sup> Her irresistibility and invisibility function as an ellipse does, with one motion encompassing two opposing forces. The narrator instructs, "Throwing back your head and closing your eyes allows you to give the appearance of sexual

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<sup>7</sup> The story locates a source of relief beyond the Dissociation Technique in reflecting on the fact that the narrator's work is voluntary, not paid, effectively separating her from being labeled a sex worker—an interesting detail that again animates questions of gender and female sexuality in determining human categorizations. ("Remind yourself that you aren't being paid when he climbs out of the water and lumbers toward you. Remind yourself that you aren't being paid when he leads you behind a boulder and pulls you onto his lap.")

readiness while concealing revulsion” (85.6). As in the smile that she wears as a mask—“like a door that is both open and closed”—the liminality of her societal role as woman ends up being strategically valuable. As a result, her objectified position that might otherwise reduce her sense of self is instead expansively doubled by her clandestine cyborgian state.

Though the Disassociation Technique is initially employed to escape a conscious experience of physical violation, at the story’s end, it returns as a method for reconnecting mind and body. The narrator accidentally deploys the technique while lying wounded at the bottom of a boat waiting to be rescued, allowing her consciousness to hover momentarily over her damaged body. In this brief interval, the narrator weighs human mortality against ethereal abstraction, identifying with the choice of other beauty spies not to return to the level of corporeal existence and instead allow their individual identities to dissipate into a “dazzling collective”:

Know that in returning to your body you are consenting to be racked, once again,  
by physical pain.

Know that in returning to your body you are consenting to undertake a jarring  
reimmersion into an altered life.

Some citizen agents have chosen not to return.

They have left their bodies behind, and now they shimmer sublimely in the  
heavens. (97.45)

Whereas theories of the posthuman often disassociate information and embodiment, the Disassociation Technique blurs any such demarcation since only her consciousness is exported while her body still acts as a safehouse for the information stored within. The difficult choice of the beauty’s consciousness as it floats above her tortured body, then, seems grounded in the problem of awareness: how not only to remain embodied in an age of bodiless information, but

how to remain critically aware through such a painfully splintering process—aware of how technology can both enhance our human capacities as well as cause us to lose touch with the invaluable resources of our primal human strength and intuition.

“Black Box,” then, presents a series of tensions between notions of the individual versus the collective: the simultaneous appeal of individual identity and personal experience as well as the dangers of a narcissistic celebration of self, the appeal of a transcendent collective as well as the risks of losing one’s distinctive identity to such a collective. Though the collectivity of beauty spies is represented in positive, even mystical terms—“Technology has afforded ordinary people a chance to glow in the cosmos of human achievement” (89.21)—the language threatens to slip into totalitarian ideology. But while the “dazzling collective” of “pulsing stars” that represent “heroic spirits of former agent beauties” conjures images of martyrdom, the story remains committed to an even more alluring option: that is, the narrator’s own precarious yet joyful life outside of her patriotic service.

By conjoining the seemingly rival appeals of individuality and collectivity, the story’s concept of a new heroism recalls the similarly named “new humanism.” Said defines a new humanism as “an unsettling adventure in difference” that must reflect a world marked by plurality, diversity, and flux (55). By making the embrace of difference its central tenet, Said’s new humanism revolves around a system of ethics opposed to dominant modes of human definition that limit the category of the human. To maintain a humanism that is true to its diverse human constituents, new humanist “definition” actually depends on a constant current of thought and critical reappraisal. Similarly, Butler’s recent work challenges liberal individualism through a contradictory vision of the human—one that comprises infinite variety as well as universal social embeddedness. Murphy argues that Butler’s “recent work on the body gestures toward the

possibility of a humanism whose ethical charge lies in an understanding of the relationship between the absolute uniqueness of each human body and an anonymous vulnerability to which each unique body is necessarily delivered” (587). While the anonymous vulnerability of all humans invites action via others’ responses to such vulnerability, these responses can take on infinite forms within a spectrum ranging from harm to care. Human precarity becomes an ethical call to action. Ideally, it leads to conscientious decisions about how people treat others.

In the new humanism of Said and Butler, the human becomes a site of critique—“critique as a form of democratic freedom, and as a continuous practice of questioning and of accumulating knowledge” (Said 47). This recognition of the political value of flux is also present in Haraway’s challenge to replace totalizing formations with “coalition—affinity, not identity” (17). Similarly, Egan’s heroine works in concert with other beauty spies to make the world a safer place to live while also choosing to maintain her own specific life “with its petty pains and loves” (97.45). Though the story ends before disclosing whether or not the narrator lives beyond the rescue, her final choice to rejoin consciousness and body resonates in an age of networked existence that threatens a healthy balance between exalted individuality and digital anonymity. Indeed, as Butler writes in *Frames of War*, individual human life is by default implicated in notions of social collectivity—“the fact that one’s life is always in some sense in the hands of the other” (qtd. in Murphy, 580). Online, the collectivity expands, gains more traceable inputs and outputs. With it, the role of the individual grows ever-more precarious, heightening our ethical obligation to others—the importance of responding with care.

### **Cyborg Storytelling**

In *On Beauty and Being Just*, Elaine Scarry connects beauty with a generative search into the unknown: “Something beautiful fills the mind yet invites the search for something beyond

itself, something large or something of the same scale with which it needs to be brought in relation (29). The search that beauty initiates is connected to the experience of truth-seeking. Scarry notes that “the beautiful, almost without any effort of our own, acquaints us with the mental event of conviction, and so pleasurable a mental state is this that ever afterwards one is willing to labor, struggle, wrestle with the world to locate enduring sources of conviction—to locate what is true” (31). Though it uses familiar genre conventions of science fiction and spy narratives, “Black Box” refuses any tidy, triumphant conclusion and foregrounds instead one of literary fiction’s most defining features: the unknown. In an age where digital technology has made facts and information infinitely accessible, “Black Box” uses this self-same technology in the service of irresolvable ambiguities.

This unknowability recalls N. Katherine Hayles’ thoughts on black boxes in *How We Became Posthuman*. Evoking Gregory Bateson’s cybernetic epistemology, Hayles describes randomness as that which “exists outside the confines of the box in which a system is located; it is the larger and unknowable complexity for which the perceptual processes of an organism are a metaphor” (286). This notion of randomness remixes the function of the black box yet again, for if a black box contains internal processes that are unknowable, randomness points to unsolvable complexities that exist outside of these mechanistic confines, complexities in tune with the mysteries of human experience and subjectivities. “Black Box” as a story, then, might itself be read as a black box that resonates doubly and inversely: it is both a black box of information that must be contained as a whole to relay its moralistic teachings, and it is a gesture out toward an unknown that exists beyond the story itself, but which the story navigates us toward. Using Twitter to facilitate experiences of the unknown is indeed a radical embodiment of the medium

since digital networks are more commonly called upon to satisfy queries that would otherwise require mental labor—labor that often spurs the formation of ethical principles.<sup>8</sup>

In the current media-filtered political climate, where notions of what is “true” and what is “beautiful” have become so abused as to become almost meaningless, “Black Box” represents a strategically placed intervention. Though Twitter may seem to afford wider connection and interactivity, another undeniable “message” of the medium is one that invites limiting selectivity, recursive self-absorption, and uncritical modes of engagement. While “Black Box” may very well be a reaction to the toxicity that digital media is capable of, it also presents more productive methods for moving forward that do not naively suggest a return to a pre-digital moment. Instead, “Black Box” suggests that technology might be wielded for empowering purposes if approached with a kind of disciplined vigilance for which the undercover spy is an apt figure. Just as the beauties must remain highly attuned to their surroundings and cognizant of their actions in order to come out of it alive, readers online must stay aware of their own modes of technological inhabitation and the challenges they present to maintaining attributes fundamental to human experience, including empathy, creation, and a quest for purpose larger than oneself.

“Black Box” thus presents a delicate balance: on the one hand, we need to be reflexive in our engagement with technology, but we cannot be so self-focused so as to lose sight of the values and experiences that make us part of a diverse human collective. One site for encouraging that kind of open reflexivity is in storytelling itself, a mode of humanist inquiry that provokes a reflexive state through investment in the stories of others. Just as Hayles turns to “the resources

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<sup>8</sup> Egan’s commitment to ambiguity and the unknown is even more radical considering Twitter’s abuse by political figures like Donald Trump who use the tool’s immediate and short-form style of delivery to spout unformed and *uninformed* thoughts. Egan’s commitment to the unknown encourages a search for higher orders of truth at a contemporary site of truth’s ongoing embattlement.

of narrative” as a “resistance to various forms of abstraction and disembodiment” (22), Egan too turns to traditional conventions of storytelling to combat two-dimensional abstractions of the human that the web makes not only possible, but also easy and entertaining. “Black Box” facilitates this kind of reflexivity by meditating on the function of narrative itself and its instructional value for human beings who engage with it. The first challenge in assessing the narrative value of “Black Box” is moving beyond its striking, aphoristic prose; celebration of these lines alone harken back to the 18<sup>th</sup>-century phenomenon of culling extracts from famous novels and collecting them in small books called “beauties.” As with Egan’s beauties, there’s so much more beneath the story’s comely exterior, but how exactly to locate its precise value?

The narrator’s instructions to preserve only the didactic and edit out the personal in her dispatches functions as a kind of call to action: a call to rethink the value of storytelling. Though the narrator is supposed to edit the dispatches for their didactic value before passing them on to her successors, the story itself confounds a final understanding of the text’s edited or unedited status. How are we to tell if the version of “Black Box” that we read is an unedited transcript or a version cleaned up for instructional uses? For instance, what do we make of the lines explaining how to deal with a data surge—“The surge may contain feeling, memory, heat, cold, longing, pain, even joy. Although the data are alien, the memories dislodged will be your own” (94.35)—followed by a series of vivid personal memories, ostensibly the ones being dislodged in the narrator’s own Data Surge experience: “Peeling an orange for your husband in bed on a Sunday, sunlight splashing the sheets; The smoky earthen smell of the fur of your childhood cat; The flavor of the peppermints your mother kept for you inside her desk” (94.35). If this is an edited version of the field instructions, are we meant to read these personal memories as didactic in nature? Or are we perhaps reading an unedited version that contains both didactic instructions



and personal musings, in which case the narrator's survival comes into doubt, for if we are indeed reading an unedited document, it suggests that she did not live to complete that particular task.

While the text's status as edited or unedited—as well as the beauty's survival in the end—are left ambiguous, the gesture toward these kinds of questions prompts a reevaluation of didacticism, both in the context of the narrator's field notes and in literary fiction more broadly. At one point, our narrator dictates: “You will reflect on the fact that these ‘instructions’ are becoming less and less instructive” (88.15). And yet, on a metatextual level, “Black Box”—with all of its imperfect, inward-looking signs of humanity—instructs. That the narrator's personal musings are part of that instructive process helps to reaffirm the value of human stories. Such focus on the instructive value of humanist inquiry calls to mind the shifting landscape of Egan's own literary moment, which is reinvesting in human values as a reaction against traditional humanism as well as a more immediate literary predecessor: postmodern nihilism. And yet, this return to humanist values is coterminous with an era of new digital media that threatens or at least complicates categories of the human. For theorists like Hayles and Haraway, such complications represent a promising opening up of once-oppressive definitions and standards.

In this new humanist vein of literary inquiry, the meaning of the story's title acquires new layers still (the story does promise that digging beneath the “shiny persona” will reveal “a rich, deep crawl space of possibilities” (91.21)). “Black Box” as a black box preserves and transmits its humanist message to distracted readers who are investing more time and attention in the dehumanizing world of social media. Like the information within the beauties' bodies, the traditional, linear structure of the story itself acts as a container for vital information—not the kind of statistical or computational data that the beauties set out to collect, but rather, instruction

on how to survive our current unruly technological moment. The readers who maintain attention and engagement enough to follow the story's single through-line, thereby keeping the black box intact, will experience a mode of connection all but foreign to the social media scene: one woven by narrative threads that are a result of intention rather than happenstance.

Though its main character asks us to consider a posthuman, cyborgian state of being, "Black Box" also proposes a cyborgian state of *seeing*—a double vision evocative of Haraway's cyborg politics wherein "Single vision produces worse illusions than double vision or many-headed monsters (15). Fittingly, the final image of "Black Box" is one of expansive double vision: the injured cyborg beauty looking up at a rescue helicopter while the people inside of it look down at her, replacing the self-reflexivity of her former floating consciousness. The helicopter looks like an "instrument of a purely mechanical realm. It may look as if it had come to wipe you out. It may be hard to believe that there are human beings inside it" (97.47). An instrument of a purely mechanical realm—Twitter—also exists between the story of "Black Box" and its readers. As the beauty looks up at the rescuers that have come to save her "their faces taut with hope, ready to jump," we see also the hope latent in "Black Box"—a story intent on reestablishing a mutual human regard in a new cyborgian mode of online storytelling. If we as readers choose to meet this gaze, we just might be able to navigate a network of often meaningless and misleading associations differently; indeed, we may feel empowered to navigate in a fashion more conducive to the pursuit of beauty and truth.

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