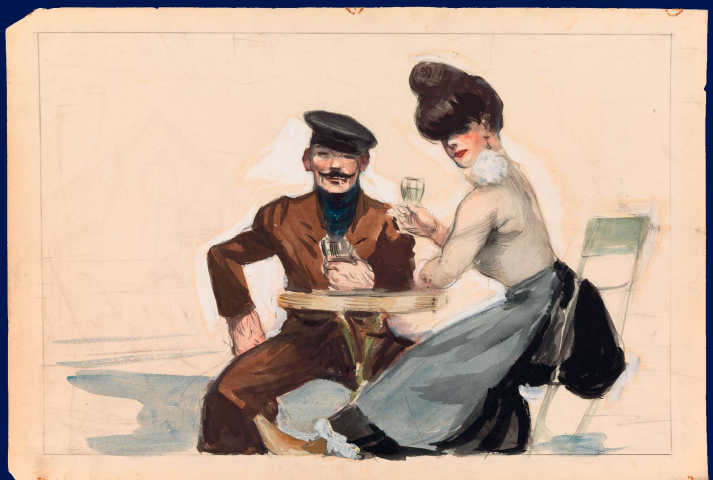
CONTRIBUTIONS TO ENGLISH
AND AMERICAN LITERARY STUDIES 8

Juan L. Pérez-de-Luque
and Paula Martín-Salván (eds.)

Democracy, Secrecy and Dissidence in Contemporary Fiction in English



PETER LANG

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AND AMERICAN LITERARY STUDIES 8

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Democracy, Secrecy and Dissidence in Contemporary Fiction in English

This volume explores the relationship between democracy, secrecy, and transparency in contemporary English literature. It focuses on how fiction engages with the tension between secrecy and disclosure, central to debates about freedom in information societies. Drawing on theorists like Derrida, Birchall, Horn, and Han, among others, the essays examine secrecy as a form of resistance against hegemonic transparency, framing it as a political act of dissent. Scholars on Secrecy Studies argue that secrecy challenges dominant ideologies and creates space for contestation, rather than aligning with oppressive systems. Literature is positioned as an ideal realm to articulate these ideas, showcasing how secrecy functions both thematically and formally. On one level, literature reflects dissidence, freedom of expression, and censorship; on another, it underscores the impossibility of full disclosure, with texts retaining interpretive openness. This collection analyzes how secrecy operates as a structuring device, shaping narrative form, and explores its connections to resistance, democracy, and transparency in cultural and political contexts.

The Editors

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Democracy, Secrecy and Dissidence in Contemporary Fiction in English

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Vol. 8

Juan L. Pérez-de-Luque and Paula Martín-Salván (eds.)

Democracy, Secrecy and Dissidence in Contemporary Fiction in English

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Contents

PART III

Secrecy, Opacity, Silence

PART IV

Dissidence—Resistance to Transparency

Peter Lang Open

Posthumanism, Secrecy, and Transparency: From Jennifer Egan's "Black Box" (2012) to "Lulu the Spy, 2032" in *The Candy House* (2022)

Sonia Baelo-Allué

The present is a time of rapid change in which technologies develop exponentially leading to the convergence of the physical, digital, and biological worlds in ways that make us rethink what it means to be human (Schwab 2016; Schwab and Davis 2018; Brynjolfsson and McAfee 2016). The human/nonhuman boundary that once stood firm is now blurred by the technologies of the Fourth Industrial Revolution. For example, bioprinting combines 3D printing and gene editing to create living tissue, which challenges the distinction between the biological and the synthetic. Both virtual and augmented reality blur the line between digital and physical environments, redefining the space in which we interact. The Internet of Things allows for digital communication between physical devices and humans and the collection and exchange of data. In this same line, bioinformatics analyses biological data through computational techniques to open the door to personalized medicine.

The boundaries that once defined human experience are re-evaluated in the twenty-first century as a consequence of the Fourth Industrial Revolution and the "nonhuman turn" (Grusin 2015). This nonhuman turn involves a qualitative departure from traditional anthropocentric views since we move away from conceptions of the human in which the self is understood as independent and superior to nonhuman entities such as animals, objects, the environment, and technology. This is a holistic approach to life in which the human and the nonhuman are interconnected. From a new materialist approach Stacy Alaimo uses the concept of "trans-corporeality," which involves that the human body is not regarded as an isolated entity but is "always intermeshed with the more-than-human world" (2010, 2). Humans not only coevolve, coexist and collaborate with the nonhuman, but the human and the nonhuman are mutually constituted in a reciprocal relationship. Rosi Braidotti, a key scholar within posthuman studies, sees the human/nonhuman interconnection as a zoe/geo/techno assemblage through which a

posthuman subject emerges that "relates at the same time to the Earth—land, water, plants, animals, bacteria—and to technological agents—plastic, wires, cells, codes, algorithms" (2019, 46). This chapter focuses on the nonhuman technological agents that constitute our identity (Kiran and Verbeek 2010, 419; Nayar 2014, 79) and are the result of the blurring of the boundaries between "the organic and the inorganic, the born and the manufactured, flesh and metal, electronic circuits and organic nervous systems" (Braidotti 2013, 89).

The contradictions that emerge from these techno assemblages have inspired several U.S. novels of the last decade: Dave Eggers' *The Circle* (2014) and *The Every* (2021), Rob Hart's *The Warehouse* (2019), Don DeLillo's *The Silence* (2020), Richard Powers' *Bewilderment* (2021), Patricia Lockhood's *No One is Talking About This* (2021), Jennifer Egan's *The Candy House* (2022) and Colin Winnette's *Users* (2023) to give a few recent examples. Drawing from this theoretical background, this essay deals with Jennifer Egan's "Black Box" (2012), which has recently become "Lulu the Spy, 2032," a chapter in Egan's latest novel *The Candy House* (2022). The text represents both the data body and the technologically enhanced body that challenge the human/nonhuman and organic/inorganic boundaries in a time in which human identity is inextricably linked to technology. *The Candy House* (2022) has provided a new context to the original text and a neohumanist perspective that acknowledges the entanglement of the human body with the nonhuman technological other, but still posits narrative as a healing agent offering selection, cohesion, and secrecy against the transparent, numeric accumulation of information of the digital age.

From "Black Box" to "Lulu the Spy, 2032": The Story of a Fluid Embodiment

"Black Box" is a spy thriller set within a speculative fiction framework. It takes place in a near future as we follow the thoughts of a female spy playing the role of an escort. She remains nameless, but Egan identified her as Lulu, a character that first appeared in the author's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2011) (Egan in Treisman 2012). In the novel, Lulu is the daughter of Dolly, a famous publicist whose reputation is ruined after she organizes an event that goes wrong. Lulu has never met her father and was born as a result of her mother's affair with a movie star. Later in the

text we meet Lulu again in 2020, when she is in her early twenties and has become a social media marketer, capable of organizing an open-air concert via her smartphone, a metaphorical extension of herself. "Black Box" is set in the 2030s and a thirty-something Lulu has now literally merged with technology and has had her body enhanced with all types of devices. She has turned into a so-called female "citizen agent" who has been trained to complete the mission of extracting information from a "Designated Mate" to prevent a terrorist attack. To do so she has to use both her sexual appeal as a "beauty" and the technological enhancements of her transhuman body. The enhanced body of the female agent is literally used to collect and contain the information she extracts from the "Designated Mate," fusing her organic body with the digital data she obtains. As a result, her body turns into an information container, effectively becoming bio-waste, since this information will be retrieved from her body regardless of her survival. The story takes place in Southern France but there is not much information about the organization recruiting her or the planned terrorist attack. In this future society, citizens can choose to become heroes and serve their country through the technological enhancement of their bodies. In the story this is called "the new heroism" and it entails the idea of overcoming individualism and self-involvement to embrace the collective and the good of the many.

"Black Box" was originally a collection of tweets published across ten consecutive nights between May and June 2012 and between 8 and 9 pm each day, one tweet per minute. Since Egan did not have an X (previously known as Twitter) account at the time, the tweets were released in *The New Yorker*'s X account. Egan had to shape her story to fit the constraints of the X format that limited each tweet to 140 characters or shorter at the time. During its original X release, the first readers of the text had one full minute to read each tweet, which invited a more aphoristic close reading of each individual line. The tweets are conceived as Lulu's series of thoughts or "mental dispatches" providing both individual content and continuity to underline the seriality of the text. They are written using the second-person pronoun since each sentence is a "Field Instruction" that works as a mission log and a didactic guide for future citizen agents. In this sense, Lulu's body becomes a metaphorical black box, which *The Cambridge Dictionary* defines as "a small machine that records information about an aircraft during its flight, used to discover the cause of an accident." Lulu becomes a black box in this sense,

since her body stores the Field Instructions, which can be retrieved even if she dies. The story is made of these lyrical self-contained thoughts that she stores and that can stand independently but also follow a narrative.

Although Egan made use of the narrative possibilities that X's combination of fragmentation and seriality provided, she did not explore the interactive possibilities of the format. She also planned in advance the whole story and for a year she edited the original manuscript until it reached 8500 words, which would end up becoming 600 tweets. Therefore, there is nothing of the improvisation that X invites and instead it shows a careful approach to the text. It is also interesting that form and content complement each other in the X version of the story since "Black Box" was literally read on a black box (the mobile phone). Only a week after the completion of its original X release, "Black Box" was published as a short story in print form in "The Science Fiction Issue" of *The New Yorker* (June 4 and June 11, 2012), setting the story within the genre and establishing certain expectations which affect how we read the story. For example, the story comes with a color photograph of a beautiful woman with a camera eye, which underlines the cyborg theme. Each tweet is separated by a blank line and organized into forty-seven paragraph-like sections, with three columns per page. It looks like printed poetry but the experience of reading it reinforces the continuity of the text, since the one-minute wait between tweets that the first readers of the story experienced disappears in the printed rendering of the story. The chronological and uninterrupted presentation of the story in *The New Yorker* also differs from the fragmented presentation through X in which each tweet could be retweeted, quoted or liked. Since the tweets that constitute the story were originally posted in *The New Yorker*'s X feed for ten consecutive nights but only from 8 to 9 pm, each day's installment became intertwined with other tweets from the journal's X feed. Besides, the access point to the text was less predictable compared to its printed version in "The Science Fiction Issue" of *The New Yorker*. In the original X publication, followers of *The New Yorker*'s X account could find out-of-context tweets from the story in their individual X News Feed. This situation created different entry points into the narrative and different reading experiences.

Ever since *The New Yorker* publication, "Black Box" has been included in an anthology, released as an e-book, an audiobook, and a standalone printed publication. Its latest rendition is as a chapter in Jennifer Egan's *The Candy*

House (2022) where "Black Box" becomes "Lulu the Spy, 2032." The new title clarifies the name of the protagonist, gives context as to what the story will be about, and provides a time frame. The story remains basically the same with only some minor changes to enhance its coherence with the new context that the novel provides, introducing references to episodes that are developed in other chapters. There are also references to the new underlying social context that emerges from the "Own Your Unconscious™" technology that has made memory externalization a reality and which is the main subject in the novel. The text is displayed similarly to *The New Yorker* edition, but the tweets are redistributed and instead of being organized around forty-seven sections, there are fifty-three in this version. Similarly, instead of displaying them in three columns, there are two columns on each page.

The complex publication history of "Black Box" has made critics like Tore Rye Andersen consider the story a fluid text with a multimodal publication history that has affected its reception since each material incarnation and context has added different connotations to the text (2015, 129). The new context of *The Candy House* integrates the story within a larger narrative concerned with the digitalization of memories, transparency/surveillance, the quantification of life, and the power of algorithms. It also continues Lulu's story in the following chapters and provides the narrative language that both "Black Box" and "Lulu the Spy, 2032" lack, offering a way out to the spider web Lulu falls into when her sense of agency and humanity disappear engulfed by the information she needs to gather, store and provide. In a sense, it seems that "Lulu the Spy, 2032"/ "Black Box" is a story with many bodies since it has been embodied in different formats and presentations. This publication history mirrors some aspects of the plot of the story, which also has to do with different forms of embodiment.

The Transhuman Body

In the posthuman era, the preconceived notion of the organic body invites reconsideration. Concepts such as the transhuman body or the data body emerge in this new reality to illustrate how the nonhuman has permeated our conception of the body, blurring traditional dichotomies such as organic/technological and the virtual/physical. In this sense, Lulu's body is both a transhuman and a data body. Transhumanism is the philosophy behind the

former. Back in 1990, Max More originally defined the movement as "a class of philosophies of life that seek the continuation and acceleration of the evolution of intelligent life beyond its currently human form and human limitations by means of science and technology, guided by life-promoting principles and values" (More 2013, 3). The objective is to enhance humans intellectually, physically and psychologically to overcome our human limitations (Humanity+). Therefore, transhumans would be "work-in-progress" (Bostrom 2005, 4) in "a temporary stage along the evolutionary pathway" (More 1990, 11).

Natasha Vita-More, who is a prominent transhumanist and artist, has an ongoing design for a future body which she calls "Primo Post-human" (2011) and that makes full use of different human enhancements. She has more recently talked about a "Platform Diverse Body" which has the advantage of allowing its use not just in the material, physical world but also in the computerized or virtual world. Personal identity could be transferred into virtual worlds through some kind of routing system (Vita-More in Przegalinska 2014). Transhumanists, at their most radical, dream of leaving the body behind to become *homo cyberneticus* once "biological slavery" is overcome (Young 2006, 44). Mind uploading or whole brain emulation is often proposed as a desirable means to achieve digital immortality (Moravec 1988; Kurzweil 1999). This obviously implies reducing the human being to information, turning the biological body into bio-waste and returning to the Cartesian mind-body dualism in which the essence of being is contained in the mind, which is disentangled and independent from the body. This is an idea that has been extensively explored in science fiction, more specifically in cyberpunk novels such as William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984) or Richard K. Morgan's *Altered Carbon* (2002).

In "Black Box," Lulu still depends on her body, which has been enhanced with technological appliances used to gather, store, and finally transfer information the way an actual machine would:

> A microphone has been implanted just beyond the first turn of your right ear canal. (87)
> A button is embedded behind the inside ligament of your right knee (if right-handed). (87)
> The camera implanted in your left eye is operated by pressing your left tear duct. (92)
> Reach between your right fourth and pinky toes (if right-handed) and remove the Data Plug from your Universal Port. (94)

Lulu's transformation is also formally reflected in the way the story is told only through Field Instructions that Lulu gives to herself. She records and stores these instructions in one of her enhancements, a chip implanted beneath her hairline. This recording accounts for what she is doing, allowing future citizen spies to learn from her experiences:

> Your Field Instructions, stored in a chip beneath your hairline, will serve as both a mission log and a guide for others undertaking the work.
> Pressing your left thumb (if right-handed) against your left middle fingertip begins recording.
> For clearest results, mentally speak the thought, as if talking to yourself.
> Always filter your observations and experience through the lens of their didactic value.
> Your training is ongoing; you must learn from each step you take. (88)

The second-person pronoun is constantly used in this mixture of instructions manual and mission log and, since the training is ongoing and is recorded as it happens in the present tense, it often includes corrective recommendations when the outcome of her action is not what she expected. According to Egan, this way of narrating came from one of her long-standing fictional interests: the idea of a story told through a narrator's notes to him or herself, that is, "a story whose shape would emerge from the lessons the narrator derived from each step in the action, rather than from descriptions of the action itself" (Egan 2012). In a way, this is how ubiquitous surveillance of our surfing history in the Internet works. Algorithms process near real-time data to construct a dynamic data identity of ourselves, which is redefined with new patterns of data coming from our web browsing, search requests, GPS coordinates, and metadata (Cheney-Lippold 2017, 9). This connection between humans and machines is not something new resulting from our digital age. Back in the 1940s, the field of cybernetics emerged to study communications and automatic control systems in both machines and living things. A key concept that could be applied to both was "homeostasis," a process of self-correction dependent on the external conditions and the input received from the environment to maintain their internal balance. Homeostasis is a concept that can be applied to human bodies (shivering or sweating to respond to the temperature) but also to automatic steering systems or thermostats. Norbert Wiener, in his 1950 classic *The Human Use of Human Beings*, claimed: "the

nervous system and the automatic machine are fundamentally alike in that they are devices which make decisions on the basis of decisions they have made in the past [...] This is the basis of at least part of the analogy between machines and living organisms" (1989 [1950], 33-34)

Lulu's body exemplifies this feedback loop, embodying a state of homeostasis where all her actions are recorded and corrected in real time to maintain the balance and achieve her objective as a spy. The blurring of human and machine becomes apparent when she transforms into a "black box" whose main role is information exchange, like the machines in Wiener's cybernetics theory. It is important to underline that a black box is used only to store information and that once the information is retrieved it becomes useless as it loses its purpose. It is its capacity to make the information available that renders it valuable. Lulu's body becomes a black box in this sense: "Your physical person is our Black Box; without it, we have no record of what has happened on your mission" (95). As in William Gibson's short tale "Johnny Mnemonic" (1981), she can directly download the information of her host's handset into her body, which is reduced to the role of container and is disposable once the information has been transferred and the mission competed:

> Remember that, should you die, your body will yield a crucial trove of information.
> Remember that, should you die, your Field Instructions will provide a record of your mission and lessons for those who follow.
> Remember that, should you die, you will have triumphed merely by delivering your physical person into our hands. [...]
> We can only reassure you that we have never yet failed to recover a citizen agent, dead or alive, who managed to reach a Hotspot. (97)

Once the information is safely obtained through the data port between her toes and is preserved, the body itself becomes bio-waste. This mirrors the way some transhumanists defend the technological enhancement of the human body but are ready to discard the biological body to achieve immortality by uploading the mind into a digital platform.

To understand what becoming bio-waste entails we can go back to Mary Douglas's 1966 seminal book *Purity and Danger* where she defined dirt as matter out of place: "dirt is essentially disorder. There is no such thing as absolute dirt: it exists in the eye of the beholder [...] Dirt offends against order. Eliminating it is not a negative movement, but a positive effort to organize the

environment" (2). Two concepts in this quotation are especially interesting. One is the connection between order and categorical thinking. Things need to be organized in clear compartments, they cannot belong to two places at the same time, there are boundaries that need to be policed. The other concept is the importance of context and how it is essential to our understanding of what dirt—and by extension waste—means. If, following Douglas, the consideration of a body as disposable depends on "the eye of the beholder" and is simply "matter out of place," in this specific transhuman context and in a digital revolution in which information becomes the most powerful commodity, all types of bio-bodies run the risk of becoming disposable.

This potential disposability of bio-bodies in a transhuman and digital era becomes apparent when Lulu deliberately distances herself from her organic body on several occasions. For example, when Lulu has to have sex with her designated mate as part of her role as a spy pretending to be a "beauty," she begins the so-called "Dissociation Technique." Similar to the countdown before launching a space rocket, she begins counting backward from ten:

> 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 three, you should feel fully detached from your physical self. […]
> Your mind will rejoin your body when it is safe to do so. (86)

When at the end of the story Lulu is shot and has to wait for her rescue, or rather, for her body to be recovered (dead or alive), she is bleeding, alone, at night, on a boat in a Hotspot somewhere in the Mediterranean. As a defense mechanism she unconsciously launches the Dissociation Technique to distance her clean mind from her dirty body in pain. This gives her an instant freedom:

> Released from pain, you can waft free in the night sky.
> Released from pain, you can enact the fantasy of flying that you nurtured as a child. (97)

Looking down at her "crumbled and bleeding" wasted body, she sees her "bare and dirty feet" and "the bloody dress wrapped around [her] shoulder" (97). Returning to it is presented as an undesirable task:

> 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)

Even though in "Black Box" Lulu has become something similar to Natasha Vita-More's "Primo Posthuman" in order to become a spy and accomplish her mission, the text does not celebrate her enhancements but focuses instead on Lulu's struggle to become one with the machine and her constant fight against her human emotions. However, in spite of the suffering that the organic body brings, Lulu still clings to it.

The Data Body

"Black Box" is a term that has also been used to refer to our present society. According to legal scholar Frank Pasquale, a "black box society" is determined by algorithms that we ignore but that shape our lives. In this society, everything is recorded:

> […] we can observe its inputs and outputs, but we cannot tell how one becomes the other. We face these two meanings daily: tracked ever more closely by firms and government, we have no clear idea of just how far much of this information can travel, how it is used, or its consequences. (2015, 3)

We live in a world of ubiquitous networked communication and surveillance (Cheney-Lippold 2017, 3, 4). This digital world is a world of mystery that we constantly feed with information despite ignoring what is done with that information or even how much information we provide in the first place. For example, when we surf the Internet, we produce data all the time, but we don't know how this data is used by site owners. However, "we are seen, assessed, and labelled through algorithmic eyes" (Cheney-Lippold 2017, 24) to the extent that we acquire "algorithmic identities" (5).

In this social reality embodiment has become a complex concept. The digital world has brought not only the virtual body but also the data body, which artist-activists Critical Art Ensemble defined back in 1995 as the virtual

body's "fascist sibling." The data body is in service of both the corporate and police state and serves both the repressive and the marketing apparatus. It is constituted by the total collection of files connected to an individual:

> From the moment we are born and our birth certificate goes online, until the day we die and our death certificate goes online, the trajectory of our individual lives is recorded in scrupulous detail. Education files, insurance files, tax files, communication files, consumption files, medical files, travel files, criminal files, investment files, files into infinity … (145)

For corporate and government bureaucracies the data body is more determining than the organic one since "[d]ata have become the center of social culture, and our organic flesh is nothing more than a counterfeit representation of original data" (146). These data bring algorithmic identities. For example, Google assigns you a gender and age depending on the web pages you have visited over the course of your "Google career" (Cheney-Lippold 2017, 6), which may or may not coincide with your actual gender and age, but it is this data body identity that is used for targeting ads. In a world of spies and secrets, Lulu is a black box also in this sense. She records the information (the input) and the agents receiving it interpret it. She doesn't know the algorithm that directs her actions and determines her future.

However, reducing people to "aggregates of parsable data" (Blas 2018, 198), suitable for direct acceptance and processing by computer, comes at a cost. The body and the mind, when they have to become one with machines, experiment a painful friction that Anthony Miccoli has called "posthuman suffering" (2010). The human-technology embrace gives way to feelings of inadequacy, alienation and lack of agency, a posthuman suffering resulting from our need for and dependence on technology. In a world of information and encrypted codes incompatible with our physical bodies, we struggle to become "datafied humans," transforming most of our lives into computable data to be "fully available to a complete integration with the information that composes the world" (2010, 106).

This suffering becomes obvious when Lulu has to repress her human feelings and fight against her human emotions and limitations to use some of her enhancements. As Precup explains, all the enhancements in Lulu's body do not turn her into a super-human. Rather, the imperfection of technology and Lulu's own human clumsiness are underlined (2016, 176). For example,

when she attaches her Data Plug to her new host's handset's data port, the data surge that follows makes her unconscious and later produces a ringing in her ears that prevents her from noticing when someone arrives (95). When using the camera implanted in her left eye, her non-camera eye is blinded by the flash because she forgets to cover it (92):

> It is reasonable to hope that a backlit screen will distract its user from a camera flash at some slight distance.
> Move close to the sketches you wish to photograph, allowing them to fill your field of vision.
> Hold very still.
> A flash is far more dramatic in total darkness.
> An epithet in another language, followed by "What the fuck was that?," means you overestimated your Designated Mate's handset absorption.
> A bright, throbbing total blindness means that you neglected to cover your non-camera eye.
> Distance yourself from agency in the flash by crying out, truthfully, "I can't see!" (92)

Datafication (Mayer-Schönberger and Cukier 2013) also leads to the transformation of the language of narration into the language of information. In *The Crisis of Narration* (2024), Byung-Chul Han traces how we are moving from a narrative era to a post-narrative one in which information proliferates. As a result, rather than storytelling we only have "storyselling," as empathy and attentive listening have been lost to digital communication and social media platforms. In *The Transparency Society* (2015), Han had already described narration as a ritualistic, selective, and ceremonial act. In contrast, information follows an additive pattern, continually accumulating (2015, 32). In our information age, our understanding remains shallow, as capacities like deep contemplation and attentive listening lose centrality. Information can be "counted but not recounted" (Han 2022, 4), as we rapidly gather ideas but sacrifice the significance, context, and depth inherent in narratives. The digital order, which Han defines as numerical, is "free of history and memory. Thus, it fragments life" (2022, 4). Lulu's Field Instructions follow this logic as they accumulate without reflection, she doesn't recount, she counts, she processes for she uses a functional language.

In the journey toward diminishing her humanity, Lulu continually refers to her actions as those of a machine, using verbs like gauge, self-jettison, navigate, or recalculate to describe her actions. The way Lulu has datafied

herself becomes obvious when the only way to tell her loved ones that she is fine and thinking of them is to press twice the button behind the inside ligament of her right knee (87). Her whereabouts is not a mystery to those watching over her because thanks to GPS she is "a dot of light on a screen" (91). On a speedboat on the Mediterranean, she knows her exact latitude and longitude but as she says, that "is not the same as knowing where [she] is" (91).

However, her human thoughts and memories of her childhood, of her husband, and of the father she has never met also keep interrupting her machine-like Field Instructions. As Han puts it, "memory traces are subject to constant rearrangement and reinscription. In contrast, stored data remains the same" (2015, 32). She has to remind herself: "Where stray or personal thoughts have intruded, you may delete them" (Egan 2012, 88). She also has to take control of her feelings and impulses, especially when they are excessive: "A wave of joy can make it difficult to sit still. Beware of internal states—positive or negative—that obscure what is happening around you" (92). These real-time corrective thoughts in which she tells herself to think more like a machine and repress her animal/human feelings, reflect the similar way in which both humans and machines rely on feedback: "Your training is ongoing; you must learn from each step you take" (88).

The story deals with the relation between humans and machines not in terms of seamless integration or blurred boundaries, but through the lens of friction. This is because humans have to suppress their thoughts, memories, impulses and feelings to seamlessly integrate with machines. They adhere to machine-like instructions and behavior and turn into data compatible with machines and algorithms in a society in which everything is reduced to information. In a future society in which the mind and the body are still seen as independent entities, the body becomes useless bio-waste. At the end of the story, Lulu is shot and waits for a helicopter to come and rescue her. But it is the information that she carries and not her physical form that holds value. As radical transhumanists would have it, the most optimal enhancement is to get rid of the biological body altogether. However, when "Black Box" becomes "Lulu the Spy, 2032," we have more context since Lulu reappears in other chapters of *The Candy House* and we see how she tries to heal and recover her sense of self and reconstruct her narrative.

"Lulu the Spy, 2032" in *The Candy House*

Jennifer Egan published *The Candy House*, her latest novel to date, in 2022. One of the chapters in the novel is "Lulu the Spy, 2032," which is a slightly different version of "Black Box." Some minor changes are introduced, like different word choices. However, other changes aim at integrating the story within the larger universe of *The Candy House*, its new embodiment. The book is mostly set in a near future, but it starts in 2010 following Bix Bouton's perspective, a character that like Lulu and many others in *The Candy House* had previously appeared in Egan's 2011 Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (*Goon Squad*). Minor characters in that former novel become central in the *The Candy House*, like Miranda Klein (ex-wife to Lou who was a key record producer in *Goon Squad*), Chris Salazar (the son of Benny Salazar, a music-industry executive in *Goon Squad*), Lincoln (the autistic son of Sasha, an artist and former kleptomaniac personal assistant to Benny in *Goon Squad*) or Lulu (the daughter of Dolly, a famous PR consultant and celebrity in *Goon Squad*). Therefore, these two companion novels share the same fictional universe.

Bix Bouton was a minor character in *Goon Squad* where he was a Black NYU engineering student and classmate of Sasha. Back in 1993, a boy he knew, Rob, drowned when swimming with another boy, Drew (who will become Sasha's husband and Lincoln's father). Bix had been with them before it happened and is still obsessed with it in 2010 when the story of *The Candy House* begins. He has founded a successful social media company called Mandala that can predict trust and influence thanks to a series of algorithms about human behavior based on the work of an anthropologist called Miranda Kline. Her book *Patterns of Affinity* contained "algorithms that explained trust and influence among members of a Brazilian tribe" (2022b, 9), which were co-opted by Bouton's company against Miranda Kline's wish. This first chapter accounts for how Bouton decides to expand his company upon learning that animal consciousness externalization is already possible and as a means to quench his need to search, retrieve, view and replay his memory of the traumatic day when Rob died (2022b, 22-3).

Six year later, in 2016, he releases a revolutionary technology called "Own Your Unconscious™" which enables the externalization of one's consciousness and memories to a "cube," allowing the revisitation and exploration of individual memories, including aspects that have faded from memory or

been repressed. The idea of memory externalization is a very popular topic in science fiction. For instance, in Philip K. Dick's "We Can Remember it for you Wholesale" (1966), memories can be planted and erased, and thoughts can be read through a telepathic transmitter. Similarly, William Gibson's cyberpunk classic *Neuromancer* (1984) introduces the concept of saving consciousness on ROM modules, allowing existence in cyberspace. Lois Lowry's young adult dystopian novel *The Giver* (1993) presents a society where certain communal memories are eliminated, and a designated Giver implants these memories to a chosen child through rubbing the child's back. Additionally, films like *Brainstorm* (1983) or *Strange Days* (1995) include devices that can record memories and sensations from a person's brain. In *The Final Cut* (2004) memories can also be edited. More recently, the trope has also been used in the TV series *Black Mirror*, particularly in episodes like "The Entire History of You" (2011) and the celebrated "San Junipero" (2016), where people's consciousness can be uploaded in a virtual reality world. The "Own Your Unconscious™" technology connects with this science fiction tradition of probing into the boundaries between technology, consciousness and memory. Consistent with this exploration, one of its supplementary features—the "Collective Consciousness"—enables users to explore and access the anonymous thoughts and memories of other users. To do so they must have previously uploaded their individual externalized memories, but this allows them to revisit memories of the past through the anonymous memories of others and from various perspectives. As a result, forgotten traumas can be recalled and missing people traced.

This "Collective Consciousness" enters an area of the self that is supposed to still be opaque to present surveillance technology: our memories and the inner workings of our minds. Whereas "Own Your Unconscious™" makes real the transhumanist dreams of achieving the immortality of, at least, our memories, its supplementary feature—the "Collective Consciousness"—comes closer to the posthuman concept of "distributed cognition." As Katherine Hayles explains, cognitive processes are distributed between human and nonhuman agents and dispersed across people, objects, and the environment. A dynamic partnership between intelligent machines and humans replaces the liberal humanist subject's manifest destiny to rule and govern nature (1999, 288-289). Our skin no longer serves as a means of enclosing or even defining human subjects (Hayles 2017, 2). The "Collective Consciousness" feature in *The Candy*

House literally gives people access to each other's memories of the past. At the end of the book, the technology develops and gives way to "Skin-to-Skin™" that allows people wearing Mandala headsets to access each other's consciousness directly if their flesh is touching (Egan 2022b, 308). However, and in spite of focalizing on Bix Bouton in the opening chapter, the novel is not a celebration of these technologies, and its textual implications suggest that the seamless sharing of memories and thoughts is ethically problematic.

The very title of the novel implies a critical attitude toward what the "Collective Consciousness" actually entails. The "candy house" alludes to the Hansel and Gretel fairy tale and the inviting gingerbread house covered in frosting and candy they find that actually hides a wicked witch inside. In this sense, the "Collective Consciousness" open-source database of memories is a literal depiction of the "the transparency society" that Byung-Chul Han (2015) describes, a society in which everything is visible, observable, and open to scrutiny thanks to the access to information and data made possible by new technologies and social media. According to Han, what we have in the twenty-first century is a digital panopticon, rather than a Benthamian one, where surveillance is conducted from a central point, occupants are isolated from each other and are aware of the supervisor's control. In the digital panopticon people think they are free as they actively network and converse with one another: "The society of control achieves perfection when subjects bare themselves not through outer constraint but through self-generated need, that is, when the fear of having to abandon one's private and intimate sphere yields to the need to put oneself on display without shame" (Han 2015, 46). Clare Birchall uses the term "shareveillance" (2018) which contains the idea of covert data surveillance alongside transparent sharing of government data. "Sharing" is linked with "veillance" since it combines both open and covert digital data practices, undermining agency as a result. In this sense, the externalized, digital memories that emerge from the "Collective Consciousness" in *The Candy House* are also used by the company's "counters," data mining experts who clandestinely collect data on patterns of consumer behavior and devise algorithms that simplify human interaction into quantifiable phenomena.

The story of "Black Box," in its new embodiment as "Lulu the Spy, 2032," is integrated within the new context of *The Candy House*, especially taking into account the technology called "Own Your Unconscious™" and its

supplementary feature the "Collective Consciousness." The society of the novel is a society of transparency, but Lulu's world of spies is one of secrecy. In the updated version of the story a new line is added: "Due to the classified nature of this work, you are strictly forbidden to upload or share any portion of your consciousness for the duration of your life" (Egan 2022a, 205). Therefore, once Lulu returns to her civilian life she is not allowed to upload her memories in a Consciousness Cube. Besides, the chip implanted beneath her hairline that she uses to record her instructions and the steps she takes becomes a "weevil" in "Lulu the Spy, 2032": "Your Field Instructions, stored in a weevil inside your skull, will serve as both a record of your actions and a guide for your successors" (2022a, 205). The weevil is supposed to be active only during her mission: "When your mission is complete and the weevil removed, you may review its contents before adding your Field Instructions to your mission file" (2022a, 205). Weevils are important in *The Candy House* since they are military devices usually implanted in soldiers and spies and that some civilians fear may have also been implanted in other individuals' brains too. This fear of implanted weevils echoes the paranoia about 5G chips being implanted to civilians through COVID-19 vaccines, which spread during the COVID-19 pandemic (Birchall and Knight 2023, 4) and it also captures wider social anxieties about the dangers of invasive, privacy-threatening technologies that we cannot control or fully understand. In the novel, the paranoia makes people like Ames Hollander, a former soldier who had a government-implanted weevil removed from his brain, build a low-frequency image device to scan and detect weevils as part of an underground "cleaner" movement.

Upon returning from her mission, Lulu's story continues in the chapter "See Below." The chapter is written through a series of intersecting email threads where most of the characters in *The Candy House* participate. Lulu is convinced that she still has a weevil "left in her brain by the government agency she almost died for" (2022b, 268) and is set to have it removed. Through Jules she contacts Ames who eventually scans her and puts her mind to rest. The contrast between secrecy and transparency, which is one of the main topics in *The Candy House*, also becomes apparent when streamers choose to use self-implanted weevils to broadcast their perceptions in real time. This contrast is embodied in the rivalry between Mandala (the company led by Bix Bouton, who created "Own Your Unconscious™") and Mondrian (a company

led by Chris Salazar, bent on helping people elude their online identities): "Surveillance vs. Freedom (Mondrian); Collaboration vs. Exile (Mandala)" (2022b, 308). At the end of "See Below," Lulu contacts Chris Salazar to offer her services, making up her mind about which side she is on.

In the chapter "See Below," we also learn that after her return Lulu has undergone several surgeries to repair the damage that the gunshot caused to her right shoulder and has given birth to twins. However, her husband is concerned for her mental health since two years after her return, she still thinks "aphoristically in the second person, as required for her mission's Field Instructions (e.g., 'Laundered socks will vanish despite your best efforts to track them'; 'Reading books about babies sleeping may not result in your babies sleeping more')" (2022b, 251). Lulu's use of the mechanical, additive language of information in "Lulu the Spy, 2032," persists even upon her return in the backdrop of a digital age in which we are overwhelmed by data and information. As Han explains in *The Crisis of Narration* (2024), the language of information that algorithms impose is functional, cumulative and additive, which transforms narration into computable data. As a result, from a traditional way of telling stories concerned with context and depth, we move to ways of narrating that are more data-driven and quantifiable, away from the nuances that human narration provides. The flood of information has suffocated the spirit and depth of the story and all we do is post, share and like (2024, 11). In this sense, Gross claims that "[d]igital technology dissolves literature into data just as it dissolves personalities into profiles" (2020, 120). This becomes apparent in two other chapters in *The Candy House* that complement Lulu's accumulative, machine-like narrative.

In the chapter "Rhyme Scheme," we have a first-person account of Lincoln, the autistic son of Drew and Sasha who was only a child in *A Visit from the Goon Squad* and who knew by heart the exact length of the pause in any piece of pop music. In *The Candy House* he has become a senior empiricist and metrics expert working for a company called Harvest. He defines himself as a "native speaker" (2022b, 81) who understood numbers before language. He is in love with M, another "counter" in the same company, and uses figures and percentages to analyze the origins of M's charm, evaluate the competition and calculate a formula to make her fall for him since "few things in this world can't be counted" (2022b, 73). However, he cannot predict x, "*the unknown value required to secure M's love* […] that ineffable, unpredictable detail that

makes one person fall in love with another person" (2022b, 74) and realizes, once they fall in love, that love cannot be predicted.

Chris Salazar, the founder of Mondrian, is the narrator of the chapter "'I,' the Protagonist," which chronologically takes place before he becomes the head of the company and starts helping eluders escape their data bodies and the surveillance of the counters. At the time when the chapter is set, he works for SweetSpot Networks, an entertainment start-up. His job is to break down stories into familiar parts to further break those parts so as to reduce them to stock elements and "algebraize" them into mathematical formulas. Though it is not fully explained, the ultimate purpose is to automate storytelling so that an AI can use algorithms to create stories:

> He'd been an English major at Stanford; he loved to read and still devoted his scant free time to the practice. But it turned out that representing stock narratives algebraically was easier than he'd expected:
> *Protagonist in a heightened state*: ***i*2**
> *Protagonist in a reduced state:* ***i*/2**
> *Protagonist, excluded by others, feels reduced:* $\boldsymbol{i < (a, b, c\ldots) = i/2}$
> ***i***, the protagonist, had even begun to assume the swaggering air of a hero:
> ***i!***
> Whereas ***a***, ***b***, and ***c*** appeared correspondingly meager—bit players who failed to get that the story wasn't about them and that ***i*** would invariably triumph. In the world of stockblocks, redemption was guaranteed. (2022b, 160-161)

As the chapter progresses, he starts to read what happens to him through "stockblocks" until he decides he is going to change his life and stop working for SweetSpot. It is interesting that, as it happens to Lincoln, Chris ends up realizing that there are aspects of life that cannot be quantified and creativity may be one of them.

Lulu takes a path similar to Lincoln and Chris since the Citizen Agent program is suspended after an exposé. Lulu, who is clearly traumatized by the experience, has to struggle with her mental health and find her narrative voice again. She still feels disembodied and dehumanized and cannot quite recover her own voice and sense of identity. However, in "See Below," she sets to organize a meeting with her biological father, Jazz Attenborough, who doesn't know about her and with whom she eventually builds a relationship. In the process, she also reconnects with old friends and acquaintances from the past, finds a new path in her life deciding to work for Mondrian and

makes sure that there is no weevil in her head. She takes control of her body and her mind. Against transhumanist desires to leave the flesh behind, Lulu recovers her humanity and feels embodied and embedded again.

Conclusion

The integration of "Black Box" within the larger context of *The Candy House* deepens the ultimate meaning of the story. Gross contends, drawing from the media and literary scholar Jochen Hörisch, that the digital revolution has displaced the book from its former centrality, turning it into a secret observer and allowing it to defend the cause of literary humanism (2020, 122). Contextualizing "Black Box" within the larger context of a novel like *The Candy House*, allows for Lulu to gain back the autonomy and sense of self that she lost to the terse tweets that made up her narrative voice in the original account of her experiences as a transhuman spy. If "Black Box" was concerned with the secrecy of a mission that ironically makes Lulu's mind transparent to the government agency she has volunteered to work for, *The Candy House* depicts a society in which people choose to freely upload their memories and freely share them in exchange for the memories of others. A society of transparency and surveillance in which there is too much information and very little narration. The final chapter of *The Candy House*, "Middle Son (Area of Detail)," is narrated by a third-person omniscient narrator that seems to celebrate fiction as a way to "roam with absolute freedom through the human collective. But knowing everything is too much like knowing nothing; without a story, it's all just *information*" (2022b, 333). It is Bix Bouton's youngest son, Gregory Bouton, a writer of fiction that suggests a way out of this dystopian world. It is Gregory's machine—his fiction writing—and not his father's "Collective Consciousness," or an implanted weevil, that can provide us with stories and access to the mind of others.

In fact, through an intricate narrative style entwining various stories, *The Candy House* formally mirrors the "Collective Consciousness" and the fragmented subjectivity of social media users, as it presents a mosaic of voices and weaves together diverse stories, incorporating various points of view, temporal shifts, and fragmented perspectives. The narrative voice and style change in every chapter underlining the interconnectedness of characters and building a collective consciousness of sorts. The first chapter

("The Affinity Charm") uses a classical third-person narrator that focalizes on Bix Bouton but we also have a chapter where different types of narrators intersect ("Case Study: No One Got Hurt"); a chapter with a collective first-person plural narrative voice ("The Mystery of Our Mother"); a core chapter where multiple characters intersect, narrated entirely through a series of interwoven email threads ("See Below") and of course "Lulu the Spy, 2032," a chapter made of a second-person series of tweets. As is the case with the "Collective Consciousness" technology, the novel permits readers to traverse the collective fabric of human existence and track the unforeseen ripples that individuals generate on each other without weevils, transhuman enhancements or whole brain emulations. Lulu reconstructs the humanity that she lost when she became an organic techno assemblage, technologically enhanced but also engulfed by the language of data and a sense of purpose that prevented the flow of her private thoughts or feelings. In this sense, *The Candy House* is a literature that engages with the posthuman and the nonhuman from a neohumanist perspective since it still firmly believes in the power of the human imagination, in the power of fiction to build the intimacy of another consciousness. After all, and as José Luis Borges once claimed drawing from Marshall McLuhan, "the book is an extension of memory and imagination" // "el libro es una extensión de la memoria y de la imaginación" (1979, 13).

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