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Writing Sample

### Posthuman Technology and its Role in Feminism: Jennifer Egan's "Black Box"

Jennifer Egan's short story "Black Box" is a first of its kind, composed entirely on Twitter in a series of tweets with 140 characters or less. While mimicking serial novels of old, Egan's technological twist evolved to take on a surprising publication rule: "Black Box" is only available as an eBook. The advancement of new technology and its impact on both public and private lives is what constitutes the main thematic concern of the text; ultimately reducing a woman to the "black box" that remains on her body. As a spy with built-in technology, such as camera eyes and microphone ears, the main character Lulu transcends to a state of posthumanism, or a state beyond being human. In the eyes of posthumanism, Donna Haraway's "Cyborg Manifesto" rejects the boundaries between animals, humans, and machines, combining socialism and feminism in the eye of technological advancement. Tim Lenoir argues for scientific optimism and embracing the posthuman in "Makeover: Writing the Body into the Posthuman Technoscape" while Amelia Precup ponders the implications of doing so for women in her essay "The Posthuman Body in Jennifer Egan's 'Black Box'". Each essay examines the positives and negatives of posthumanism in both individual and societal contexts. However, the utilization of Lulu's body as a government tool in "Black Box" is not limited to spy technology; Lulu is hypersexualized and referred to as "a beauty" with the goal of getting close to her "Designated Mate" who is an assumed terrorist. It is through the technologically-advanced publication style, the usage of Lulu's body as a digital informational tool, the usage of Lulu's

body as a sexual tool, the objectification of Lulu's thoughts, and the patriotic propaganda that justifies those uses that Egan passes along an important message: technological advances and dangerously dehumanizing sexism can go hand-in-hand, and unless society addresses its inequalities, technology will be used as a tool to use and oppress, not advance or enhance, the lives of common citizens.

By tweeting out each "log" – in hourly installments each evening over ten days, Egan successfully mimics both the narrative's system of thought-log communication and the normal behavior of all Twitter users. In doing so, Egan and *The New Yorker* humanize Lulu through social media, integrating her character into our own reality. This sporadic release of narrative shapes "the rhythmic flow of the text and impregnates it with aphoristic overtones" that speak several modern truths (Precup, 172). A subtext of procedural work practices, communications best-practices, and internalized societal rules shine through the social media delivery system: keep things short, be useful, pretend everything is okay, keep posting, don't stop. These 140-character submissions work not only as constraints, therefore, but as tonal guidelines for the narrative voice that blur the line between what is fictional and what is reality. And in doing so, Egan slyly turns her readers into something posthuman as well, rendering us "so problematic, subverting the structure of desire, the force imagined to generate language" as we consume, refresh, and consume each tweet (Haraway, 12). This plot-delivery system "evolves and reasserts itself by forcing the update" with each new tweet, much in the way that social media users do with self-branding, and forces readers to become as dependent upon technology as Lulu if they wish to continue the story (Precup, 173). In doing so, Egan reminds readers that Lulu is only as removed from reality as ourselves – the differences between Lulu's "logs" and user's daily tweets are minimal at best, which disproves "the notion that digital information is disembodied"

and draws attention to the “smooth and unbroken articulation” we have with intelligent machines today (Lenior, 203). This parallel to our own reality grants Lulu more reality-based autonomy than the narrative does, which negates the reduction of Lulu’s body to technological tools of the state. This merging of reality and fiction is the primary tool in Egan’s toolbox; by blending the two, Egan points out the similarities in both worlds and poses the existential question of what might happen to us, the readers, if we continue down a posthuman path.

Unfortunately, the narrative does not grant Lulu such autonomy – her body is grafted with espionage machines and weapons that turn her into a government spy, a “sacrifice” she must endure for her country in an act of “new heroism” as a power-donated cyborg. This sci-fi merging of body and technology is explored both through “the technologically enhanced body, ‘programmed’ to complete a mission” and as the “disposable body used as a black box,” which ultimately objectifies Lulu in horrific ways (Precup, 174). As a “new hero” Lulu must intertwine herself with machinery and willingly donate her body to a so-conceptualized higher purpose. Her own eyes are replaced with camera lenses for the government, her skin replaced with a Subcutaneous Pulse System, her thoughts recorded for future reference via a microchip, all of which “redefine her human limitations and, implicitly, her social and political roles” as she takes on a dangerous mission (Precup, 176). This posthuman transformation into “a hybrid entity” that is “socially regulated and discursively constructed” ultimately strips Lulu of true autonomy (Lenior, 210). The agency that is in control of Lulu’s modified cyborg body does not care for her personal wellbeing, “your physical person is our Black Box: without it we have no record of what has happened on your mission”, as long as her body as an object is unharmed (Egan, section 38). By writing this conflict of interest, Egan underlines the idea that “the relationships for forming wholes from parts, including those of polarity and hierarchical domination, are at

issue in the cyborg world” through the shock value of the objectification of a human into a black box (Haraway, 2). As a human woman, Lulu is a sum of many parts; however, to the government, Lulu is merely a tool for national security and hierarchical domination.

Instead of a tool for national security, to her “Designated Mate” Lulu’s body is a sexual tool that exists to provide him with gratification, to be used as a trophy-like object and disposed of on a whim. Disturbingly, this is known, expected, and put to use by the government, which teaches her a dissociation technique to cope with rape, “Begin the Dissociation Technique only when physical violation is imminent” rather than teaching methods of evasion and/or escape (Egan, section 8). Aside from the word “violation,” Egan ensures readers understand the horror of these actions by the repetition of the phrase “remind yourself that you aren’t being paid” as the sexual actions begin, pointing out Lulu’s personal discomfort, disgust, and possibly fear (Egan, section 7). In emerging posthumanist discourses, “the body is seen either in terms of its functional enhancement through literally incorporating technology, or as dispensable bio-matter” which begs the question of whether or not Lulu’s body has been altered to appear more sexually appealing as well as technologically useful (Precup, 174). Being called a “beauty” in context suggests a formal assignment, rather than a visual observation, which would indicate that Lulu’s body was either chosen for sexual objectification or enhanced to be used sexually. Indeed, instructions such as “the goal is to be a lovely, innocuous, evolving surprise” underscore the government’s exploitation of Lulu’s outward appearance, in which success is measured by “if your Designated Mate leads you to dinner with an arm at your waist” (Egan, section 16). This embodiment of archaic feminine stereotypes enforces the idea that “the ‘beauty’ is viewed as a human subspecies, with clearly established behavioral patterns, prescribed by the Field Instructions manual with ethological accuracy, as if drawing on long term observation” which

indicates that Egan wanted readers to realize how deeply the sexism runs in Lulu's world (Precup, 182). However, in modern context the concept of even being female is "itself a highly complex category constructed in contested sexual scientific discourses" which are "forced on us by the terrible historical experience of the contradictory social realities of patriarchy," or, in other words, a social construct even today (Haraway, 6). In writing these Darwin-esque, taxonomic field instructions, "Egan invites reflections about whether technological advancement can assist in the evacuation or, at least, the attenuation of sexist... tendencies" by drawing attention to the gender discrimination and sexual abuse Lulu faces (Precup, 183). Between the treatment of Lulu as a dispensable sexual object by both her Designated Mate and the assumption that she will successfully function as a sexual object by the government agency, Egan cautions against the dangers of advancing technologically without advancing as a society.

Not only is Lulu's body literally objectified into a combination of sexy dispensable biomatter and government technology, but her very thoughts are turned into a tool "instrumental to storing and transferring information" that will be used to perpetuate such objectification in another woman (Precup, 174). By exploring this concept of a disposable body with a thought-logged black box, Egan creates two separate lenses with which to view Lulu: Lulu as the physical tool, and Lulu as the mental being. However, the cyborg-like implants that turn her into a physical tool are "downplayed by pointing out the imperfections of the devices" through the camera flash malfunctions, the whine of the microphone, and general weakness against user error (Precup, 176). Because the "machines were not self-moving, self-designing, autonomous" Lulu's function as a spy relies on her ability to think and act (Haraway, 3). In doing so, Egan subverts the traditional practice of glorifying a woman's physical attributes over her mental ones.

However, Lulu's mentality is also objectified, serving "as both a mission log and a guide for others undertaking this work" which turns her very thoughts into a tool (Egan, section 15). In fact, this mission log/guide combination allows readers to see two layers of narrative at work; first, the actual list of instructions; second, the list-like personal thoughts that intrude on the log's narrative; "these 'instructions' are becoming less and less instructive" which show Lulu's own thoughts drifting off-topic (Egan, section 15). While the idea of technological thought-translation and "migrating consciousness to other media" is exciting and implies that there's a "lack of a dividing line between human beings and machines" there's an underlying threat of thought-control going both ways (Lenoir, 206). Instead of thoughts and emotions existing only as an abstract, "personal history, feelings, desires, sentience are understood as codified information, stored in the body, transferable and even dispensable," which means that information-control becomes, at minimum, a two-way street (Precup, 178). These more personal thoughts in "Black Box" are followed by two instructive reminders: "always filter your observations and experience through the lens of their didactic value" and "where stray or personal thoughts have intruded, you may delete them" which allows readers to glimpse the control of the government over their agent's minds, informational output, and emotional feedback (Egan, section 15). If "liberation rests on the construction of the consciousness, the imaginative apprehension of oppression, and so of possibility," then the reminders to delete personal thoughts indicate information control as a direct tool of oppression for the government (Haraway, 1). Moreover, Egan's stylistic choice to blend past instructions and current logs without noticeable distinctions blurs the line between Lulu's personal thoughts and government directives, which is addressed in an artificially-sunny attitude, "In the new heroism, the goal is to transcend individual life, with its petty pains and loves, in favor of the dazzling collective" which sounds entirely too cheerful for a woman who

might be raped multiple times and killed (Egan, section 45). These structural and tonal choices point to a terrible possibility: posthumanism may, in fact, lead to a loss of individualism at best, and a strengthening of veiled tyranny at worst.

While delivered on a typically lighthearted social media website, Jennifer Egan's "Black Box" blurs the lines between science fiction, fantasy and reality in the face of posthumanism and paints a stark picture of what the negative implications of technological advancement may be. The objectification of Lulu's body and mind serve as a warning about the evolutionary prospects of an unequal society may become. By both subverting and re-affirming Lulu's autonomy, Egan reminds readers that independence is a slippery thing to possess; it requires a level privacy that may not be possible in a posthuman future. The sacrificial gesture of giving up her body for the government leaves Lulu as a vessel for government control. Through the subjugation of violent men, rape, and possible death, Egan makes a feminist and humanist statement that societal advancement must outpace technological advancement as a mortal, and moral, imperative. In the face of our own exploration into new methods of technologically-advanced information sharing, Egan's "Black Box" reminds readers that knowledge is power, privacy is autonomy, and politically-charged propaganda is a dangerous tool of oppression.

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