Exploring Image Culture Through Narrative:
A Study on Jennifer Egan's Twitter Fiction *Black Box**

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Notable for the completeness with which it surrenders formally and artistically to the textual dictates of Twitter, Jennifer Egan's 2012 short science fiction *Black Box* is one of the most triumphant and fully-fledged fictions written in the form of new media. This paper explores the Twitter narrative employed in *Black Box*, pointing out that the serialized tweeting format of the story released via computer, mobile phone, or other electronic equipments brings readers immediate reading experience, allowing readers to sense the same feelings as the protagonist does. Through the experimental serialization of "Twitter" narrative, Egan expresses her concerns and worries about the security of the American security as well as the whole world in the post-"9·11" period and at the same time she embraces the virtues and pleasures of traditional storytelling delivered through a wholly new digital format. This paper concludes that *Black Box* is perhaps one of the boldest experiments of narrative form and is direct exploration into the contemporary image culture.

Keywords: Jennifer Egan, *Black Box*, Twitter narrative, image culture

Introduction

Jennifer Egan (1963-), winner of the 2011 Pulitzer Prize, is a contemporary American fiction writer with popular appeal and a novelist of ideas noted for the elegance of her style. Egan is the author of *The Invisible Circus* (1995); *Emerald City and Other Stories* (1997); *Look at Me*, a finalist for the National Book Award in fiction in 2001; *The Keep* (2006), a national bestseller after its publication; and *A Visit From the Goon Squad* (2010), the 2010 National Book Critics Circle Award for Fiction and the 2011 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction. In 2012, Egan published a short science fiction *Black Box*. First released in an unusual serialized format on the *New Yorker*'s Twitter account, *Black Box* was published as a series of 606 tweets releases at the rate of one tweet per minute for an hour between eight to nine p.m. EST (Eastern Standard Time) on nine consecutive evenings from May 24 to June 2, 2012. There are 140 words for each tweet and totally 8,500 words. Because of the disjointed sentences, the story reads more like a prose poem than a short story. You can read the story—tweet by

tweet—below or head over to *The New Yorker* for a more traditional reading experience.

The story of *Black Box* is in the form of "mental dispatches" from a spy living in the Mediterranean area (south of France) in the near future (perhaps in the 2030s). After trained as a spy and being planted high-tech equipment in the body by the American National Security Department, a woman was sent to the Mediterranean area to steal highly secret information from some powerful men, who were thought to be terrorists to threaten the American security. As she goes undercoverly among such suspected terrorists by deploying badger game, she keeps a mental log of events in her body and her physical person is the "Black Box".

Twitter as a New Media Narrative in *Black Box*

Since the turn of the century, postmodernism has been superseded as our contemporary cultural dominant by "digimodernism": the textual, cultural, and artistic practices prompted by new digital technologies. Consequently, in the scope of narratology, the postmodern narrative has been also marked by new media narrative. The term "new media narrative" was probably first used by the American scholar Jason Ohler in 2008. Bringing together "new media" rather than "digital" and "storytelling", Ohler emphasizes the wide range of potential forms that new media narrative can be used for and can take. He suggests that the use of new media narrative captures the "decentralized spirit" of media production and consumption. After Ohler, the Australian writer-designer-director Christy Dena further proposes that new media narrative is differentiated primarily from books, films, and theatre by its ability to allow users to choose the path or presentation of the story, converse with characters and play a role in the action.

With the rise of new media genres such as blogs, Twitter, Facebook, and other social-network sites as mainstream channels for online communication, new media narrative has been widely applied and become more and more popular in contemporary society. New media serial form has long been of interest to narrative scholars, but the characteristics of new media serial narrative still have not been precisely identified. Narrative analysts have explored serial forms of the nineteenth-century literature, television narrative, comic books, and film serials. They are beginning to engage with newer media such as computer games, fandoms, and web-disseminated narratives. In many of the previous scholarly studies on serial narratives, the qualities of seriality are assumed rather than clearly defined. Jennifer Hayward provides a starting point with her description of the serial as "an ongoing narrative released in successive parts" (Hayward, 1197, p. 3). Sara Gwellian Jones further suggests that there is usually a gap between one serial installment and the next and that the installments are often disseminated on a regular basis (e.g., publication may occur on repeated daily or weekly occasions).

In contemporary society, with almost all the information updates and tweets on the internet, the millions of individuals on social-networking sites are more than staying connected—they are reading, writing, editing, distilling, and interpreting the written word more than any generation in history. In doing so, they are successful to develop *Fiction 2.0*: a fascinating marriage of character-count restrictions and the network effect that has created a new category of short-form content and narrative experimentation. Twitter, as a way to renegotiate social relations in a changed, technologized world and dramatizes the dangers of being an embodied subject in an age of information exchange, was founded in 2006 by an American web developer Jack Dorsey. Although it has been burgeoning since its inception, the growth of Twitter has increased exponentially since January 2009 such that at the outset of 2010 the site boasted over 140 million users.

Twitter is a kind of microblogging site, in which members communicate with each other by posting messages known as tweets. The characteristics of a tweet reflect Twitter's evolution within SMS (short message service) constraints. One Tweet can be no longer than 140 characters in length. They do not allow appended comments and they are multifunctional. They can be used to send a message to another individual or to an indefinite number of others, to report on daily activities, forward messages or information from others, share links and so on. Twitter is potentially a "noisy environment" where communication is fast-paced and ephemeral. In order to mitigate this, users have developed a number of conventions to assist in keeping track of the communication threads. For instance, using the "@" symbol to indicate a public message directly addressed to a particular individual or a Twitter username; the "#" symbol to trace topic threads and the abbreviation "RT" to signal that a message is being retweeted, that is, forwarded from another user. There are usually three main types of tweets: addressed messages, retweets, and updates. An "addressed message" refers to a public tweet that begins with a "@username" address, and so will be registered in the @mentions folder of the user's account; "retweets" are tweets which have been forwarded without amendment and begin with the abbreviation "RT"; "updates" are all other publically available tweets which appear in a tweeter's timeline.

The information posted in Twitter can be posted publically so that anyone, even if they are not a member of Twitter, can view the content on the tweeter's home Twitter page. Alternatively, privacy protocols can be set so that the tweet is only seen by the individuals who have been accepted as followers of the tweeter in question. Unlike Facebook, where privacy protocols are widely applied, only a small percent of Twitter accounts are private, the default assumption of public communication dominates instead. The relationship between Twitter users is also distinctive. Unlike in most human social networks, the relationship between individuals and their followers in Twitter was low in reciprocity. In other words, most users do not follow the same people who are following them in Twitter. This asymmetry is mirrored in other communicative dimensions typical of Twitter, specifically, the balance between one-to-many compared with one-to-one exchanges and whether or not users and their followers are known to each other. So although Twitter is still sometimes defined as a social network site, its interpersonal dynamics suggest a rather different pattern of communication from those that might occur in semi-private, peer-to-peer environments like Facebook.

With the rapid growth of Twitter, there appears a new literary narrative form: Twitterature, a combination of "Twitter" and "literature", is a narrative form paying tribute to brevity and talent using social media as a portal for readership. Twitterature includes various genres, including aphorisms and poetry, within the 140-character maximum imposed by the medium. Some Twitterature works are self-contained; others, such as Twitter novels, extend over multiple "tweets". Besides Twitterature, there are commonly recognized new fiction prototypes which include nanofiction, a type of flash fiction exactly 55 words long; crowd-sourced narratives, folk from all across the world takes turns "tweeting" the next direction a story should turn and together, larger narrative coagulates—messy and blotted but pulsing with life; infographics, graphic visual representations of information, data, or knowledge intended to present complex information quickly and clearly; and $0.00 stories, "the advent of e-publishing has, more than creating (or fracturing) a new audience and marketplace, spawned a new revolutionary delivery mechanism: not e, but free" (Rudin, 2011).

The earliest Twitter form narrative work in American literature might have been written by Ernest Hemingway. Legend holds his proudest work was just six words long: "For Sale: baby shoes, never worn".

Allegedly, he wrote the piece to win a bet—an experiment in and of itself—and it's safe to say no Twitter feed in all its 140-character potency has produced anything so powerful. With just a few words, Hemingway crafted a compliment to the forms of fiction his audience already loved, that he himself had already mastered, and by revealing little, provided much. The new fiction prototypes exclusive to today's digital era are experimental, so much so that Hemingway himself might not have bet on them. But as books and fictions, the written word itself, fight to maintain a foothold against the fascinating mediums swirling all around them, we owe it to ask ourselves what would be built in the form of the fiction in the future. After all, millions of individuals on social-networking sites are more than staying connected with one another—they are reading, writing, editing, distilling, and interpreting the written word more than any generation in history.

Jennifer Egan, though rather a reluctant user of new technology herself and writes fiction by hand, deploys new media narrative strategy in the 2011 Pulitzer Prize-winning book *A Visit From the Goon Squad*. Chapter Twelve of *A Visit From the Goon Squad*, "Great Rock and Roll Pauses", is written in the form of a series of Microsoft PowerPoint slides and is presented as the creation of Alison, the twelve-year-old daughter of one of the protagonists, Sasha. Alison resorts to PowerPoint because it is her native words, but Egan is obviously delighted in overcoming the artificial constraints of the format in order to tell the simple story of a girl's relationship with her family especially her autistic brother and the latter's sentimental obsession with musical pauses. By creating this collage of a fiction, with constantly shifting narrators and varied styles of writing, Egan becomes one of the most recent and successful practitioners who practice a kind of writing trend that has been steadily seeping into the world of contemporary literature.

Originally published online via Twitter by @NYerFiction, Egan's first new fiction since the extraordinary success of *A Visit From the Goon Squad* is a tightly tidy piece of work. In an apology to her Twitter followers who were victims through her Twitter account as well as continued to be inspired by untraditional new media technologies of literary creation, Egan decided to reveal her new fiction one tweet at a time. Since May 24, 2012, the story of *Black Box* has been tweeted at @NYerFiction between 8-9 p.m. EST. Because of the seemingly independent sentences, the story reads more like a prose poem than a fiction. If its unusual mode of publication has gained widespread attention, its success also largely derives from its skillful manipulation of the literary possibilities offered both by the tweet and by serial digital publication.

Black Box is not the first literary piece to take the shape of pre-existing digital platform, and of course much literature before Egan has already been published online, including on Twitter. As early as 2006, the British writer Sam North's fiction *The Velvet Rooms*, for instance, is largely related to the internet. The characters in the fiction are, at least at first, cyber-creations: the fantasy alter egos of ordinary people. They meet in a chat site called the Velvet Rooms, and occasionally they pair off to type smuttily to each other. The fiction comprised the elements of cyber-related narrative though incorporated into a traditional fiction framework.

Rick Moody, an American novelist and short story writer who attracts his audience with the fictions *Garden State* (1992) and *The Ice Storm* (1994), tapped into Twitter's followers by publishing a story over 153 consecutive tweets. Moody is an example of an author who found a way to enable his print readership by way of Twitter. Already the owner of a traditional audience, he used Twitter to stimulate his audience. Moody's another unique work *Some Contemporary Characters* (2009) was a short story exclusive to Twitterature, but the unique delivery device gave Moody and his way of writing plenty of disputes because a lot of Twitter users "re-tweeted"

the story to their followers. Though Moody admitted his story was "absolutely written ground up on Twitter, for Twitter, about Twitter, with the character counter page open the whole time, to keep me from going OVER", he also acknowledged the experiment was likely a "flash in a pan" (Masters, 2009).

Matt Stewart, another American fiction author whose debut book, *The French Revolution* (2010) is widely regarded as the first full-length fiction to be published entirely on Twitter. Feeding readers with a new tweet every 15 minutes over four months from July 14 to October 21, 2009 with approximately 3,700 tweets, Stewart's Twitter fiction attracted 1,000 followers on Twitter. Stewart was therefore called a "pioneer" by CNN.com and received worldwide media coverage for his Twitter experiment. *The French Revolution* was released in traditional book form on Bastille Day, July 14, 2010. It received a strong critical reception and was named a Best Book of 2010 by the *San Francisco Chronicle* and recognized as a notable debut by poets and writers. Talking about the tweeting experience, Stewart explains "It's tremendously rewarding to see that publishers are embracing a terrific story—and innovative (and dare I say Dickensian!) ways to connect with readers" (Boog, 2009).

Apart from the above mentioned writers and their Twitter works, the Penguin publishing company released a book named *Twitterature* in 2009, which summarizes 80 of the "greatest works of western literature" by abridging and parodying them in 20 tweets or fewer each. The Twitter pieces in the book are humorous reworkings of literary classics for the twenty-first-century, from Beowulf to Bronte, from Kafka to Kerouac, and from Dostoevsky to Dickens, each distilled through the voice of Twitter to its purest, pithiest essence. At the time of *Twitterature*'s publishing, its authors Alexander Aciman and Emmet Rensin were just two nineteen-year-old sophomores from the University of Chicago, and it is possibly the site's official page that describes their endeavor best of all: "Twitterature provides everything you need to master the literature of the civilized world, while relieving you of the burdensome task of reading it" (Aciman & Emmett, 2009, back cover). The publisher's praise of the book is also quite interesting: "Perhaps while reading Shakespeare you've asked yourself, *What exactly is Hamlet trying to tell me? Why must he mince words and muse in lyricism and, in short, whack about the shrub?* But if the Prince of Denmark had a Twitter account and an iPhone, he could tell his story in real time—and concisely!"(Aciman & Emmett, 2009, back cover) Here is an example of how the book translated portions of *Hamlet* into the language of a modern Twitter user's personality and mannerisms:

> @OedipusGothplex
> My royal father gone and nobody seems to care.
>
> Mom says to stop wearing black.
>
> STOP TRYING TO CONTROL ME. I won't conform! I wish
> my skin would just…melt.
> ...
> AN APPARITION! This shit just got HEAVY. Apparently
> people don't accidentally fall on bottles of poison.
>
> Why is Claudius telling me what to do again? YOU'RE NOT
> MY REAL DAD! In fact you killed my real dad. :(
>
> 2bornt2b? Can one tweet beyond the mortal coil?

...
WIF IS POLONIUS DOING BEHIND THE CURTAIN???
...
@PeopleofDenmark: Don't worry. Fortinbras will take care
of thee. Peace. (Aciman, & Emmett, 2009, pp. 32-33)

Here, by using the frequently used Twitter symbols such as "@", the smiling face ":(" and the economical expression "2bornt2b", the Twitter version of *Hamlet* obtains so much of the contemporary flavor that William Shakespeare had never expected.

Apart from the bold adaption of the classical literature by the two teenagers, similar experiments have been done with the Bible: "@biblesummary" summarizes whole Bible chapters in single tweets and the adaption of *Ulysses*: a group of James Joyce fans shortened every eight pages of *Ulysses* down to a single tweet. Experimental and fascinating as they are, what they all have in common is summarization and immediacy. Including a full glossary of online acronyms and Twitterary terms to aid the amateur, Twitterature turns long, difficult and burdensome books to simplified and condensed ones, making them immediately more accessible to contemporary or less educated audiences.

Although the above mentioned are noteworthy first experiments of Twitterature, they do not use Twitter as a literary medium. The tweets are meant as summaries and interaction, not as stand-alone literature. Based on previous experiments and researches, the British newspaper *The Guardian* has taken things a step further. In October, 2012, *The Guardian* invited twenty one well-known writers, from Ian Rankin and Helen Fielding to Jeffery Archer and Jilly Cooper, to compose stories of up to 140 characters. These attempts resemble flash fiction, very short fiction of just a few hundred words. Because of their brevity, many of these stories hint or suggest conflict rather than fully delineated plots and characters. Among them, the Scottish crime writer Ian Rankin's tweet fiction is an especially good example: "I opened the door to our flat and you were standing there, cleaver raised. Somehow you'd found out about the photos. My jaw hinted the floor" (Twitter fiction: 21 authors try their hand at 140-character novels, 2012). In just about 140 characters, the tweet accomplishes much of what an entire short story does: There are characters, although we do not know who they are. There is conflict, although we are not sure of its specifics. There is setting, although it is not fully detailed. Already, we can guess at the relationship between the two characters and have the ideas of some back story about the problematic photos. While released in the form of Twitter, this is really good flash fiction, it's not Twitter fiction. These pieces could very easily appear in print and not be read any differently. Although they limit their words a little more strictly than most flash fiction, authors of the stories do not fully engage Twitter as a time-based, interactive medium.

Jennifer Egan, on the contrary, is among the few writers who have moved beyond summarization and flash fiction. Unlike the previous examples, Egan's *Black Box* does not confine itself to a single tweet and therefore falls outside the realm of flash fiction. Instead, it is fully-fleshed out and time-based. The delay and interval between each released segment slows down the reading, putting it in the same arena as serial fiction and television programs. While the story successfully explores Twitter as a time-based medium for reading, it does not explore it as a time-based medium for writing. The reason is that Egan's tweets were all written beforehand, she was not composing them as she went along releasing one tweet, nor was her narrative interspersed with real-time tweets from followers, which are the key elements of real time Twitter narrative. Anne Trubek claims

that Egan's story has left out some of the key elements of Twitter such as scrolling backwards, responding to other tweets and unrelated tweets popping up:

> Twitter works this way: a question is posed; people answer; the questioner responds; others weigh on. As @colindickey points out, Twitter scrolls backwards. But none of these elements—reverse chronology, conversations between tweets, tweets on unrelated topics popping up in between—are found in Jennifer Egan's short story, "Black Box". (Trubek, 2012)

As Trubek rightly points out, Egan's story does not take advantage of Twitter as an interactive medium, only as a serial one. *Black Box* is notable for the completeness with which it surrenders formally and artistically to the textual dictates of Twitter, which is not only the story's medium of publication but also its expressive ground and horizon. The formal challenges Twitter poses would have been those of economy and continuity: Each tweet would have to consist of 140 characters or fewer, and to stand alone as a single self-contained thought while simultaneously feeding into an ongoing story. Egan's solution was first to adopt the thriller genre, with its conventional deployment of consecutive or real narrative time, its clipped, eloquent phrasing, and its atmosphere of breathtaking through mysterious implication. Egan's prose is concise, exact, lucid, and witty, and her poetically rhythmic phrases, often driven by connecting contrasts and parallels, are adapted to the writing formation. The opening sentences of the story, for instance, are just like proverbs and quotations:

> People rarely look the way you expect
> them to, even when you've seen pictures.
>
> The first thirty seconds in a person's
> presence are the most important.
>
> If you're having trouble perceiving and
> projecting, focus on projecting.
> ….
> Some powerful men actually call their
> beauties "Beauty."
>
> Counter to reputation, there is a deep
> camaraderie among beauties. (Egan, 2012, p. 85)

The sentences quoted above sound like a wise man is teaching his descendants and followers the life experience and principles. They also sound like the sentences what we have read from the books of *Chicken Soup for the Soul* and Francis Bacon's *Essay* which can make us more knowledgeable as well as can wash our brain and soul. The extraordinary usage of language has a similar effect with the works of American writer Gertrude Stein, and even with that of Chuck Palahniuk, an American novelist and freelance journalist who describes his work as transgressional fiction. Not only the opening lines, but also almost all the language in *Black Box* is full of rhythm and sounds like music rhyme. The sentences in Section Four are also good examples to show Egan's skillful usage of language:

> When you know that a person is violent
> and ruthless, you will see violent
> ruthlessness in such basic things as his

swim stroke.

"What are you doing?" from your
Designated Mate amid choppy waves after
he has followed you into the sea may or
may not betray suspicion.

Your reply—"Swimming"—may or may not
be perceived as sarcasm.
"Shall we swim together toward those
rocks?" may or may not be a question.
"All that way?" will, if spoken correctly,
sound ingenuous. (Egan, 2012, p. 85)

With the thriller genre filled with the story, readers gradually learn that the daunting missions are granted by the security agent to some beautiful women, whose targets are some shadowy, powerful, and frightening men who stay in ambiguously, and exotic locations. The futuristic agent has various physical implants to aid the beauty, including a device that records her thoughts and thereby provides a documentary of her mission for those who sent her.

A button is embedded behind the inside
Ligament of your right knee (if right-
handed).

Depress twice to indicate to loved ones
that you are well and thinking of them.
...
Your Field Instructions, stored in a chip
beneath your hairline,
…
Pressing your left thumb (if right-handed)
against your left middle fingertip begins
recording. (Egan, 2012, p. 15)

...

Reach between your right fourth and
pinky toes (if right-handed) and remove
the Data Plug from your Universal Port.

Attached to the plug is a cable with a
connection pin at one end for insertion
into the handset's data port. (Egan, 2012, p. 34)

This "black box," once retrieved, will also function as an instruction manual for agent trainees to follow. The story is therefore recounted through general principles that offer advice for interpreting and behaving in the situations where, implicitly, the narrator has found herself: "Eagerness and pliability can be expressed even in the way you climb from the sea onto chalky yellow rocks"; "Never betray urgency, not even in an empty hallway" (Egan, 2012, p. 6).

Egan states that the idea of tweeting *Black Box* predated the story itself. She has been interested in that idea for quite a while. Inspired by the way that some nineteenth-century fiction was constructed around its serialization, Egan has been trying to use it as a delivery system for fiction:

> So, the question was: what kind of story would need to be told in these very short bursts? I had that thought in my mind, and then it converged with a few other interests: I wanted to try to write a spy story set in the future, and I was interested in telling a story in the form of a list. And, out of all that, I began to have a sense of a woman's voice speaking in these short dispatches about her spying experiences. As soon as I began hearing that voice, it was clear that this would be the piece that would be, in some way, disseminated over Twitter. (Treisman, 2012)

With its releasing in the form of Twitter, its skillful writing strategies, Egan's *Black Box* is probably the most splendid successor of the serial publication in magazines and it can be retreated as "the traditional post post-modern novel" or the return of the traditional fiction. It is closer to the length of a single monthly piece of Charles Dickens's or Thomas Hardy's multivolume books. At the same time, Egan embraces the virtues and pleasures of traditional storytelling delivered through a wholly new, digital format. In so doing, she accords her fictive strategies with those of sociologically dominant narrative forms in contemporary popular image culture, where individual episodes released at regular intervals both stand alone and contributes to a continuing story. Egan's use of the new media serialized narrative changes the way of reading and thinking, leading and forcing us to pay close attention to and participate in the diffusedly high-tech-aided narrative form of the mass media culture, that is, new digital media culture in terms of the transition from books and newspapers, via movies and television, to computer-based digital forms, which deeply interests Egan and which is what she has always been exploring.

Conclusion

The serialized tweeting format of *Black Box* released via computer, iPhone, or iPad brings the reader immediate reading experience, allowing the reader to sense the same feeling as the protagonist does. Egan expresses her concerns and worries about the security of America as well as the whole world in the post- "9·11" period. The Twitter narrative is like a tale told by telegram, which coincidences with what Douglas Rushkoff puts forward in the afterword of Boorstin's *The Image*:

> Although the American historian Daniel Joseph Boorstin predated the net, foresaw the direction in which we are going, and longed to alert us to both the humanity and intellect we would be destined to leave behind as we leaped forward in a world of image. What he may not have realized, however, is "the extent to which the emergence of networking technologies might eventually challenge the preeminence of the image factory from which he recoiled". (Boorstin, 2012, p. 266)

Egan's Twitter fiction *Black Box*, to some extent, goes beyond Boorstin's predication. It is one of the boldest literary experiments and direct exploration of the networking technologies in contemporary image culture.

Twitter, which can be read backwards, committing a pretty sophisticated act of making sense through reverse chronology, works this way: A question is posed, people answered; the questioner responds; others weigh on. But none of these elements—reverse chronology, conversations between tweets, tweets on unrelated topics popping up in between—is found in Egan's *Black Box*. Therefore, there will be some discussions and disputes on the question whether *Black Box* is really a Twitter fiction or only in the form of Twitterature. Surely there will be a lot of room for readers especially critics to discuss about.

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