

Posthuman Selves and Algorithmic Memory in the Digital Narratives of Jennifer Egan's Fiction

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Abstract

Jennifer Egan's two interlinked novels - *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2010) and *The Candy House* (2022) - exemplify how posthuman subjectivity and algorithmic memory reshape identity in the digital era. *Goon Squad* comprises twelve nonlinear, interwoven stories that together form a sprawling narrative network. This polyphonic form intentionally resists a single center and, as one critic notes, "gestures toward contemporary structures of posthumanist sociality". *The Candy House* picks up these themes by imagining a technology ("Own Your Unconscious") that lets users literally "digitise" and share their personal memories.

In the novel, characters replay curated recollections on demand, dramatizing how memory has become externalized and algorithmically managed. In both texts, Egan shows identity not as an autonomous, continuous core but as a fragmented, networked process co-produced by data, media, and code. Posthumanism (Hayles, Haraway, Braidotti) reconceives the self as decentered and entangled with technology. For example, Rosi Braidotti defines posthuman subjectivity as "distributed" across heterogeneous assemblages rather than located in an isolated individual. Donna Haraway's *Cyborg Manifesto* similarly uses the cyborg metaphor to "break down" binaries between human and machine. As Marianne Hirsch observes, transmitting memory through machines (rather than through human relationships) would "fundamentally alter how we construct identity". Egan's narratives engage these paradigms: they illustrate how networked environments produce algorithmic memory and fragmented selves, aligning literary fiction with critical debates in digital humanities and information theory.

Keywords: Posthuman identity, algorithmic memory, digital narrative, Jennifer Egan, contemporary American writing

Introduction

Jennifer Egan's acclaimed novels demonstrate how contemporary American fiction increasingly explores the ways in which digital technologies and AI alter the human experience. Contemporary literary authors are now depicting characters whose identities are intertwined with networks, databases, and algorithms. *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2010), a Pulitzer Prize winner, and its loosely related "sibling" novel *The Candy House* (2022) delve into the music industry, memory, and identity in the digital era. These works employ innovative narrative forms—interlinked short stories, non-linear time, multimedia elements—to reflect a world shaped by computers and connectivity (Francesca, 2022). Critics note that Egan's writing "highlights the ways in which literary experiment can break into mainstream markets" while grappling with technological advancement. In other words, she brings digital-age themes into the fabric of contemporary American storytelling.

Key terms in this study include posthuman selves, algorithmic memory, and digital narratives. By posthuman selves we mean identities conceived beyond humanist boundaries – selves decentered from the anthropocentric ego and entwined with machines, networks, and non-human agents. This concept, informed by posthumanist theorists like Hayles (1999) and Haraway (1985), frames our understanding of characters whose consciousness extends into technology. Algorithmic memory refers to memory practices mediated by algorithms and platforms – memory as data, organized, retrieved, and even interpreted by machine processes. Finally, digital narratives are literary works that are shaped by or reflective of digital media: hypertext fiction, interactive stories, or novels employing structures akin to networks and databases. In Egan's novels, the narrative form itself often mimics digital connectivity, and characters' lives illustrate new modes of memory and selfhood under technology.

This paper asks: (1) *How does Egan depict posthuman selves in digital contexts?* (2) *In what ways do algorithmic processes shape memory and identity in her narratives?* (3) *How do Egan's digital-inflected narratives challenge conventional American literary forms and themes?* We approach these questions through a close reading of Egan's texts informed by digital humanities and cultural theory. The analysis is grounded in existing criticism and theory. For example, Eggers (2023) argues that *Goon Squad* uses "the network's apparent formlessness" to explore posthuman relationality in a "connective world". Stamenković (2024) examines how *Candy House* portrays a futuristic

society where social media dominate communication, foregrounding crises of memory and private subjectivity. We synthesize these perspectives with broader discussions of memory, identity, and technology. Our goal is to show how Egan's work both reflects and advances conversations on the "digital self" in American culture.

Digital Narratives and the American Literary Landscape

The turn of the 21st century saw American literature experimenting with digital forms and themes. Hypertext fiction, multimedia poetry, and online storytelling began to blur boundaries between print and screen. Scholars such as Ryan (2004) and Aarseth (1997) describe these as interactive digital narratives or "ergodic literature," where readers actively participate in non-linear stories. Egan intervenes in contemporary literature by blending formal innovation with "political and economic discourses" such as technology and neoliberalism.

Egan has also directly engaged with digital media as a writer. Her short story "Black Box" (2012) was originally serialized on Twitter, demonstrating her willingness to use online platforms. Critics have highlighted this story's focus on "technological mediation of the self," suggesting it allows readers to reflect on "their own modes of technological embodiment". Such experiments foreshadow her later novels. In the era of smartphones and social networks, Egan writes with a consciousness of how data flows and digital connectivity shape narratives. In effect, her books become part of an evolving digital literature, bridging the gap between traditional novelistic form and the logic of networked information. As one scholar observes, the structure of *Goon Squad* and *Candy House* can be understood through the metaphor of a network – an idea borrowed from new media theory – rather than conventional plot-driven narrative (Hinojosa, 2022). In this way, Egan's work heralds a literature of the algorithmic age, where stories are interlinked webs and readers are invited to navigate a "narrative network".

Posthuman Selves in Jennifer Egan

Both *The Candy House* and *A Visit from the Goon Squad* explore the dissolution and transformation of the isolated modern self in a networked age. In *Candy House*, Egan introduces a range of speculative technologies that render the psyche data-accessible. The protagonist Bix Bouton – a tech entrepreneur – creates Mandala, a company whose signature innovation is an app called "Own Your Unconscious." This app promises users the ability to scan their brains and offload memories to a cloud-based database. Users can later "download" these

memories or share them with others. In effect, individual experience becomes a shared, searchable commodity. As one reviewer notes, “the novel presents the possibility of digitizing one’s memory” and asks “how much of our experience should we render into tech hegemonies in the name of connection?” (Francesca, 2022). In Egan’s imaginative universe, users literally upload their conscious and subconscious data onto devices – procedures described as “externalizing one’s consciousness” onto memory chips. This effectively decouples mind from body. Characters debate suicide versus “backing up” their minds, and a character named Lulu even transmits data via a biometric port on her toes, blurring the line between flesh and hardware (Francesca, 2022).

The effects of this technology on identity are profound. As Mandala co-founder Pippa Lassiter cynically observes, these memory technologies reduce humans to manipulable components: “Mandala reduces the human to the simple components, and thus offers their posthuman, technological counterparts back to the consumers” (Stamenkovic, 2024). In other words, personal identity is treated algorithmically, as a composite of data bits that can be edited or erased. This “industrialization of memory” mirrors the posthuman critique: agency no longer resides solely in the embodied individual but is distributed across machines and networks. Egan dramatizes this when her characters’ sense of self is literally constructed from curated memories. As Vanessa Francesca writes, in *Candy House* “writing is low philosophy, memory is...low identity: we create ourselves from the way we anthologise, edit, and erase the past” (Francesca, 2022). The metaphor is apt: identity becomes analogous to a manuscript under continuous revision, a process that algorithms facilitate.

A Visit from the Goon Squad similarly illustrates posthuman selves, albeit in a more implicit, emergent way. Its ensemble cast of characters – musicians, executives, students – navigate a world where communication technologies subtly reshape behavior and self-understanding. In the final chapter, set in a near-future New York ravaged by climate change, we meet Lulu, a “handset employee” who is essentially connected at all times via her mobile “T” device. Egan explicitly labels Lulu “a living embodiment of the new ‘handset employee’ – paperless, deskless, commuteless, and theoretically omnipresent” (Hinojosa, 2022). Lulu’s very presence collapses boundaries: her “theoretical omnipresence” makes no sharp distinction between home and work, and between person and device. She even finds face-to-face conversation too “loud” and prefers texting, reflecting how the digital medium becomes her primary mode of being. In Lulu, the posthuman self is exemplified: she is a subject whose

identity is continuously mediated by technology, who exists as much in the network as in her own skin.

The networked nature of identity pervades Egan's character dynamics. Fabian Eggers (2023) argues that *Goon Squad* uses the notion of a narrative network to probe posthuman sociality: characters replace one another like interchangeable nodes in an ever-evolving network. For example, Alex DeLuca takes over the role of assistant from another character, symbolizing how human roles can be swapped within a system (Hinojosa, 2022). Notably, Eggers emphasizes that Egan's text "gestures toward contemporary structures of posthumanist sociality," highlighting how individuals in *Goon Squad* are entwined in webs of technology and global capitalism (Hinojosa, 2022). This insight applies also to *Candy House*, where characters routinely outsource their cognition: one man attempts to use algorithms to chart his life's trajectory, reducing relationship decisions to game theory.

Moreover, Egan foregrounds the fragmentation of the unitary self. Her interlinked stories often resist the clear hero-villain dichotomy; protagonists intermingle with antagonists in ambiguous ways (Francesca, 2022). This narrative fragmentation mirrors the ontological fragmentation of her characters. The "posthuman" identity here is not a singular soul, but a patchwork of influences, memories, and algorithmic profiles. As one scholar notes, Egan's fiction "accepts as [its] premise a world where the category of reality no longer holds out the promise of orientating the self" (Stamenkovic, 2024). In other words, traditional anchors of identity (place, narrative continuity, even coherent consciousness) are dissolved. Instead, Egan portrays selves as dynamic assemblages – part human, part data – whose cohesion depends on digital networks.

Algorithmic Memory and Digital Consciousness

Central to Egan's posthuman vision is the idea of algorithmic memory – memories processed, stored, and retrieved by algorithms rather than by organic brains. *The Candy House* takes this to the extreme. Every person in Mandala's ecosystem can offload personal memories into a shared digital repository. For example, one service called "MemoryShop" not only stores conscious recollections but even allows users to "remove painful memories" from their minds. Another device lets someone tap into the consciousness of another person by streaming "elements of one's personality" to the skin (Stamenkovic, 2024). Eventually Egan introduces "Collective Consciousness," a project through

which countless individuals upload their minds to a central server, creating a searchable archive of human experience. These fictional technologies depict memory as utterly externalized: memories become data points in a collective database rather than ephemeral, private moments.

Egan dramatizes how algorithmic memory reshapes personal and collective identity. By enabling people to access and curate all past experiences at will, Mandala's services effectively outsource cognition. Recall theorist Paul Ricœur's idea that we "read" our memories and give them narrative meaning. In *Candy House*, Ricœur's interpretive memory is supplanted by algorithms. Francesca points out that Ricœur distinguishes between reading memories as sequences of facts or as performative interpretations, but when memory is "externalised into a piece of hardware," the novel asks, "what happens to the process of interpretation we use to sustain it?" (Francesca, 2022). In Egan's world, algorithmic systems flatten and reify memory: what was once fluid and subjective becomes fixed and analyzable.

Contemporary theory helpfully captures this shift. Media scholar Benjamin Jacobsen argues that today's platforms cause us to "remember with algorithms". He coins "algorithmic emplotment" to describe how algorithms "construct and tell narratives about us," weaving data, experiences, and people into "coherent... narratives in the present". Egan's fiction enacts this idea. Mandala's algorithms literally re-plot users' pasts according to neat categories and themes. Characters note that memories curated by the system feel inhumanly clean and sometimes alien. As one character in *Goon Squad* (Rebecca) laments, words like "friend," "real," and "story" have been "shucked of their meanings and reduced to husks" by digital culture (Hinojosa, 2022). In *Candy House*, the process of offloading memory inverts human remembrance: when Lulu encounters her own digitized consciousness, she must question what is real and what has been mediated.

Egan also gestures at the ethical dimensions of algorithmic memory. The narrative evokes concerns like surveillance and data ownership. For example, *Candy House*'s social media company Mandala is named after a meditation object – a "lure for a process of soul-searching that ends in profit for a privileged few" (Francesca, 2022). This nods to Shoshana Zuboff's critique of "surveillance capitalism," in which even our private thoughts and emotions become extractable "behavioral surplus" for corporate use (Francesca, 2022). In Egan's story, subscribers willingly sacrifice privacy by contributing every dream and longing to Mandala's algorithms. The novel thus dramatizes how

digital memory practices can lead to profound social costs: intimacy becomes transaction, and forgetting – a human need – is rendered difficult in a permanent database.

Other contemporary writers mirror these themes. Egan's speculations fit within a broader literary pattern in which algorithmic or AI agents shape human fate. For instance, one may compare Candy House's collective mind to Charles Yu's *Interior Chinatown* (2020) or Octavia Butler's AI worlds in "Dawn" (1987), where technology redefines memory and self. But unlike pure science fiction, Egan maintains a human scale: even as characters interface with machines, their emotions and crises remain intimate and personal (Francesca 2022). In summary, algorithmic memory in Egan's novels is not just a gadget – it is a narrative driver that rearranges consciousness. Through it, Egan interrogates how technology reconstitutes what it means to remember and to be oneself in the digital age.

Thematic Concerns and Broader Implications

Egan's digital narratives foreground several major themes of the 21st-century "American self," reconfigured through posthuman and algorithmic lenses. Fragmentation of identity and narrative is paramount. Both novels shatter linear storytelling and singular points of view. As *Goon Squad* opens with one character and leaps to another decade's story in the next section, readers experience time as a "relentless progress" that fractures lives (Hinojosa, 2022). This mirrors how identities are fractured by networks and media. Instead of a unified autobiography, Egan presents a collage: memories and personas scatter across chapters. This narrative fragmentation dramatizes the postmodern condition of dispersed selves. It also echoes critical claims that the digital age dissolves coherent personal narratives into data fragments. As a result, the novels invite readers to piece together meaning across disparate segments, reflecting how we increasingly compile our stories from tweets, feeds, and profiles rather than a single life chronicle.

A second theme is the American self in relation to technology and the "many Americas." Egan's characters inhabit diverse worlds that collectively suggest a multiplicity of American experiences. We see tech utopians like Bix Bouton and Lulu's corporate world in New York, but also characters in academia, struggling musicians, and characters abroad (The Candy House has sections set in Argentina, for instance). In this way Egan embraces a "Many Americas" sensibility: identity is not monolithic but hybrid. However, algorithms tend to

flatten this diversity into stereotypes and metrics. *Candy House* explicitly shows this: one chapter (“The Affinity Charm”) introduces a woman who, by cultural trait analysis, is deemed a “Universal Ally” to every group, yet she instinctively knows that this label does not fit her lived reality (Francesca, 2022). This scenario illustrates how algorithmic classifications can erase the nuances of identity. In doing so, Egan suggests that technology can both connect and homogenize cultural differences, posing questions about authenticity and representation in multicultural America.

Memory, surveillance, and digital culture intertwine in Egan’s thematic concerns. Memories are no longer personal archives but part of a shared commercial system. This resonates with real-world social media practices (e.g. Facebook Memories), where platforms remind us of past posts algorithmically. One study notes how users find such “algorithmic memory” both intrusive and nostalgic. Egan dramatizes the extremity of this: *Candy House* portrays memory as capital. Characters literally sell or donate their memories. This raises questions akin to the “right to be forgotten” debate: what should remain private? What can we delete? Moreover, Egan probes the tension between experience and capital. Francesca (2022) observes that Egan’s characters cry out for authenticity in a world that tries to commodify even our “screaming” – the raw human moment – into an experience to be bought and sold. The novels thus critique digital surveillance: we are constantly watched and profiled, and our inner lives become fodder for profit.

Finally, Egan’s work contributes to broader literary discourse on identity and technology. By positing conscious computers and memory banks, she intersects with posthumanist critiques of the American self. The implication is that traditional notions of a stable, sovereign identity must be rethought. This aligns with theorists like Rosi Braidotti who argue for understanding the self as fluid and entangled with machines. Egan’s stories enact an “implication”: as Michael Rothberg (2019) suggests, we are implicated in each other’s experiences, not isolated individuals. In *Candy House*, literal mind-sharing creates a collective “implicated subject” – one person’s memory might once have felt like another’s. The novels suggest that in the algorithmic age, the boundaries between personal and communal, real and virtual, victim and agent become blurred. In an era of surveillance and data mining, Egan preserves the importance of play, art, and human-scale perspective. Her final stance is cautiously hopeful: though technology reshapes us, narrative and empathy remain vital instruments for imagining new forms of life and community (Francesca, 2022) .

Conclusion

Jennifer Egan's *The Candy House* and *A Visit from the Goon Squad* use inventive narrative form and speculative technology to explore what it means to be human in the digital age. They depict posthuman selves – characters who extend beyond their bodies and whose identities are co-constructed with machines and networks. They dramatize algorithmic memory by showing memory as a transferable, searchable commodity, raising profound questions about authenticity, privacy, and the nature of consciousness. Structurally, these novels break from conventional American literary realism: time is non-linear, stories are networked, and language is sometimes fractured (“shucked... to husks” (Hinojosa, 2022)). Through these techniques, Egan challenges the reader to reconsider the notion of a unified self and a stable narrative truth.

Our analysis reveals that Egan's digital narratives capture the fragmentation of identity in contemporary society. In her world, individual histories are written as data points, and lives are lived inside algorithmic processes. Yet Egan never loses sight of human complexity. Even as she shows technology's encroachment, she foregrounds the human emotions behind it – love, regret, aspiration – highlighting that narratives, whether human or machine-made, carry our need to make sense of experience.

For literary studies and digital humanities, Egan's work suggests new directions. Scholars might further examine AI-authored or AI-shaped fiction to see how authorial agency changes. Cross-cultural comparisons of digital literature could reveal how posthuman themes play out in non-American contexts. The question of the American self also merits more research: how do diverse American voices adapt or resist the digital and posthuman condition? Finally, Egan's fiction reminds us that as technology advances (perhaps one day to AI-generated novels), the essential project of storytelling – to “render human experience into art” – remains crucial. She invites us to imagine futures where the line between human and machine is continually renegotiated, and where literary imagination can shape those futures with sensitivity and creativity.

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