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Reading Against the Algorithm: Narrative Opacity in Patricia Lockwood and Jennifer Egan

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Abstract

This article examines how Patricia Lockwood's No One Is Talking About This (2021) and Jennifer Egan's The Candy House (2022) make narrative opacity a formal response to algorithmic culture. Situating both novels within contemporary American literary studies, it argues that fragmentation, polyphony, and narrative gaps resist the assumption that greater informational access produces greater understanding. Drawing on literary ethics, reader-response theory, digital-culture scholarship, and Adam Kelly's recent work on Egan and digital trust, the article shows how both novels turn uncertainty into an ethical condition that protects human experience from total computational legibility.

Keywords: Contemporary American Fiction, Patricia Lockwood, Jennifer Egan, Narrative Form, Narrative Ethics, Algorithmic Culture, Datafication, Digital Culture, Opacity

1. Introduction

Patricia Lockwood's No One Is Talking About This (2021) and Jennifer Egan's The Candy House (2022) belong to a body of contemporary US fiction that has made digital mediation inseparable from questions of subjectivity, memory, intimacy, and form. Lockwood's novel begins inside what it calls "the Portal," a continuously circulating environment of posts, jokes, arguments, images, and fragments; Egan's novel imagines a technology, "Own Your Unconscious," that promises to make memories available across a network. Both novels therefore invite readings concerned with the social and economic power of digital technologies. Yet their most consequential intervention may occur at another level. Neither simply represents a technologically saturated America. Each makes the reader experience a problem that its fictional technologies attempt to solve: how to live, remember, and interpret when experience cannot be reduced to stable, searchable, or predictive information.

This formal question matters within contemporary American literary studies because the category of the "contemporary" has itself been a problem of historical and aesthetic definition. Amy Hungerford's account of the period formerly called contemporary emphasizes the difficulty of treating recent literature as a settled historical object rather than as a moving field whose boundaries remain unstable [1]. More recent accounts have likewise questioned the usefulness of treating postmodernism as the final explanatory framework for late twentieth-and early twenty-first-century US fiction. Adam Kelly's work is particularly important here. His account of Jennifer Egan's fiction locates her career within a transition from the literary New Sincerity of the 1990s and early 2000s toward a "genre turn" in contemporary fiction, emphasizing the aesthetic, economic, political, and gendered dimensions of that shift [2]. His more recent monograph New Sincerity similarly places Egan among a generation of American writers whose formal choices respond to the conditions of neoliberal culture [3]. Read in this context, Egan's formal experimentation-and, by extension, Lockwood's-should not be understood simply as a late afterlife of postmodern indeterminacy. It belongs to a historically specific literary field shaped by digital infrastructures, platform economies, and new demands for informational access [4].

Scholarship on digital culture has provided a substantial vocabulary for this transformation. N. Katherine Hayles has examined how digital environments alter relations among cognition, embodiment, media, and reading; Zara Dinnen has situated digital media within the history of American literature and culture; José van Dijck

has described the social logic of platformed connectivity; and Ted Striphas has traced the longer cultural history of algorithmic organization. Shoshana Zuboff's account of surveillance capitalism, meanwhile, describes an economic order in which behavioral data become a resource for prediction and intervention. These approaches clarify the material and institutional pressures surrounding the novels. But a literary-critical question remains: what happens when a novel does not merely depict such pressures but makes its readers encounter resistance to the demand for informational completeness? That question requires bringing scholarship on digital culture into conversation with theories of narrative form and reading [5].

The formal dimension of this problem has been approached from different directions by reader-response theorists and scholars of narrative ethics. Wolfgang Iser's theory of the "gaps" in literary texts explains how interpretation depends upon the reader's active movement among what a narrative reveal, withholds, and revises. Umberto Eco similarly understands the open work as one whose structure permits multiple actualizations rather than a single exhausted meaning. Narrative-ethical criticism, from Wayne Booth and Adam Zachary Newton to James Phelan, further insists that formal choices shape relations among readers, narrators, characters, and acts of judgment. Emmanuel Levinas provides a philosophical vocabulary for the ethical limit involved here: the other person cannot be reduced to an object of total knowledge without losing the alterity that makes ethical relation possible. The present article brings these traditions together with contemporary studies of digital culture in order to argue that narrative opacity acquires a distinct historical force under algorithmic conditions [6].

By narrative opacity, I mean a formal resistance to the assumption that experience should become completely available to knowledge. The term is deliberately different from ambiguity in the abstract. Ambiguity can describe a feature of literary language; opacity, as used here, names a relation between literary form and a cultural demand for legibility. Algorithmic systems operate through classification, prediction, personalization, and the extraction of patterns from accumulated data. Their power does not depend only on knowing what a person has already done; it also depends on converting traces of past behavior into expectations about future behavior. Against that predictive orientation, Lockwood and Egan repeatedly produce moments in which information accumulates without yielding total understanding. More perspectives do not necessarily create more certainty. More memory does not necessarily produce deeper intimacy. More visibility does not necessarily produce ethical knowledge.

This article therefore makes three related claims. First, Lockwood and Egan transform familiar techniques of fragmentation and perspectival instability into historically situated responses to algorithmic culture. Second, their novels revise the meaning of narrative uncertainty by connecting it to ethical questions about privacy, alterity, and the limits of knowledge. Third, their formal experiments participate in the broader development of contemporary American fiction rather than standing outside it as merely technological or postmodern curiosities. In Lockwood, discontinuity interrupts the accelerated circulation of the Portal and becomes especially significant when the novel moves toward the irreducible experience of family grief. In Egan, polyphony and fractured chronology undermine the promise that the total preservation of memory will result in total understanding. Reading the novels together reveals a shared literary proposition: uncertainty is not simply what remains after knowledge fails; it can be a condition of ethical relation.

The argument proceeds in four stages. The first situates the two novels within debates about contemporary US fiction, Egan's formal development, and algorithmic culture. The second reads Lockwood's fragmentation as a formal interruption of platform temporality and as a way of protecting experiences that resist public circulation. The third turns to Egan's dispersed narrative architecture and the counter-archive represented by the "counters," arguing that the novel separates informational access from ethical understanding. The final section compares the two novels and proposes a post-digital ethics of opacity in which literary reading becomes an exercise in tolerating incompleteness. The point is not that literature can stand outside technology, but that the novel can expose the limits of technological epistemology from within the conditions that produce it.

1.1 Contemporary American Fiction, Egan, and Algorithmic Form

The placement of these novels within contemporary American fiction requires more than a general claim that they are "about technology." The contemporary US novel has repeatedly used formal innovation to register changes in economic and cultural life, but the historical meaning of such innovation has shifted. Amy Hungerford's discussion of contemporaneity cautions against treating recent literature as a settled historical object; instead, contemporary fiction remains a moving field in which competing accounts of history, identity, politics, and form coexist. Adam Kelly's work on Jennifer Egan is especially useful here because it situates her formal experimentation within the changing conditions of contemporary American fiction, rather than treating fragmentation as simply a residual postmodern technique.

That intervention matters for The Candy House because the novel's fragmentation is often easily absorbed into a familiar vocabulary of postmodernism: multiple voices, unstable chronology, embedded documents, and competing versions of events. Yet the novel's problem is not only whether reality can be represented coherently. It is whether an unprecedented increase in access to information can produce the kind of knowledge that ethical relations require. "Own Your Unconscious" is a fantasy of technological totalization. It externalizes memory, makes it searchable, and imagines that access to another person's stored experience will reduce the distance between subjects. The novel's narrative structure, however, continually reintroduces distance. The archive grows while certainty remains incomplete. In this respect, Egan's formal practice belongs to the contemporary field Kelly describes: its experimentalism is neither a retreat from

realism nor a simple celebration of formal instability, but a means of testing how literary form behaves under changing social and technological conditions.

Lockwood's relation to this field is different but complementary. Her novel begins with an unusually compressed representation of platform consciousness. The Portal does not merely appear as a setting; it becomes a rhythm that organizes attention. The text moves through fragments that resemble posts, reactions, jokes, political observations, and compressed acts of self-display. This formal resemblance has led critics such as Giorgia Garilli and Tyne Daile Sumner to emphasize the novel's relation to internet language, affect, datafication, and digital subjectivity [7,8]. Their work is essential to the present argument because it establishes the material and linguistic conditions against which the novel's later formal transformation should be read. The question, then, is not whether Lockwood imitates social media successfully. It is what happens when that form of circulation encounters an experience that cannot be adequately circulated [9].

The comparison between the novels thus depends on a distinction between technological representation and formal response. Both novels represent systems that promise greater access to experience. But both also construct narratives in which access fails to become mastery. This failure is not presented as a technical defect. It is where the ethical significance of the fiction begins. In an algorithmic culture, uncertainty is often treated as something to be reduced: recommendation systems anticipate preference, predictive systems model behavior, and platforms organize users through categories generated from traces of activity. The novels reverse this direction. They produce additional information without guaranteeing closure and invite readers to experience the difference between accumulation and understanding. Their formal structures consequently turn a problem of contemporary culture into a problem of literary reading.

1.2. Reading Lockwood Against Algorithmic Culture

No One Is Talking About This initially appears to offer an almost perfect formal analogue for the contemporary social-media feed. Its first movement is composed of short, discontinuous units that shift rapidly among observation, joke, commentary, political thought, and emotional reaction. The effect is not simply fragmentation but a particular temporality: each unit seems to demand immediate recognition before the next arrives. Garilli's account of Lockwood's transformation of internet humor into literary language helps explain why the novel's form cannot be dismissed as an ornamental imitation of online discourse (Garilli 2025) [7]. Sumner's discussion of datafication likewise identifies the novel as a meditation on the production of digital subjectivity (Sumner 2024) [8]. What becomes visible when these arguments are extended formally is that Lockwood eventually turns the speed of digital circulation against itself.

The Portal is governed by repetition and replacement. Content becomes visible through circulation, and attention is continually redirected toward what has newly appeared. The novel's fragments reproduce that movement while also making it perceptible as a constraint. The reader is repeatedly asked to make provisional connections between units that do not arrive with the explanatory transitions of conventional narrative. This difference matters. Algorithmic circulation minimizes the pause between one item and the next, whereas literary fragmentation can force the reader to confront the work of connection. The novel therefore inhabits the form it critiques. It does not position itself outside digital culture and condemn it from a safe distance.

Instead, it converts the rhythms of platform life into a literary structure that can expose their effects on attention and interpretation.

Iser's account of textual indeterminacy clarifies why this exposure matters. A gap in a literary text is not simply missing information; it activates the reader's participation in constructing relations among textual elements. In Lockwood, the gap becomes historically charged because the reader is already living amid systems designed to anticipate and automate acts of connection. The novel's discontinuities therefore make interpretation feel different from scrolling. The reader cannot simply accept the next item as the solution to the previous one. Connections have to be made, tested, and sometimes abandoned. What emerges is a form of reading that requires temporal extension rather than immediate recognition. Narrative opacity begins here as a practice of refusing the assumption that every interruption should be resolved by the next piece of information [10].

The novel's second movement makes the ethical stakes of this form more visible. The narrator's movement from the Portal into the intimate circumstances of her family, especially the diagnosis of her niece's fatal condition, disrupts the expectation that digital saturation can be treated as the novel's final horizon. The transition does not create a simple opposition between false online life and authentic offline life. Such a binary would understate Lockwood's achievement. Instead, the family narrative reveals that experiences of suffering and care do not become ethically intelligible merely because they are intensely felt or publicly represented. The narrator confronts an experience that cannot be processed through the Portal's habitual modes of circulation, compression, and recognition.

The niece's condition also changes the problem of narrative knowledge. The opening sections can make the narrator's consciousness appear unusually exposed: her perceptions, jokes, judgments, and associations are continually externalized in language that resembles the public circulation of digital life. The family crisis introduces a different relation between consciousness and representation. The narrator cannot simply turn grief into another communicable unit. The child's experience is not made transparent by the narrator's proximity to it, and the reader is not granted a complete psychological account of either character. What remains inaccessible is not a failure that the novel expects criticism to repair. The withholding itself establishes a boundary around another person's suffering.

This boundary becomes especially significant in relation to platform culture, where visibility is often treated as a form of value. Digital environments encourage the documentation and circulation of personal experience, while the economic logic of platforms depends upon transforming activity into data. Lockwood's family narrative does not deny representation, but it refuses the idea that representation can exhaust experience. The suffering of the child cannot be made equivalent to the information available about her. The narrator's effort to understand is consequently accompanied by an awareness of what cannot be known from the outside. The novel's opacity is ethical precisely because it prevents the other person from becoming an informational object.

Levinas offers a philosophical vocabulary for this limit. Ethical relation, in his account, begins not with possession of knowledge but with an encounter with another who exceeds the categories through which the self-attempts to comprehend. Lockwood's narrative does not illustrate Levinas mechanically, but its formal organization makes a comparable distinction between proximity and mastery. The narrator may become closer to her niece through care, yet closeness does not produce complete access to the child's consciousness. The reader occupies a similar position. The novel invites emotional and interpretive engagement while withholding the fantasy of total interior access. Opacity therefore does not prevent ethical relation; it makes a particular form of ethical relation possible [11].

The formal shift from the Portal to the family narrative consequently changes the meaning of fragmentation. Early fragmentation resembles the divided attention of digital culture. Later fragmentation becomes a means of refusing the cultural demand that experience be made fully communicable. The same formal resource acquires a different ethical force because the object of representation has changed. Lockwood's achievement lies in making this transformation without abandoning the language and rhythms of the digital world. The novel does not discover an untouched realm outside the algorithm. It discovers, within algorithmic culture, experiences that cannot be assimilated to its logic.

The result is a distinctive critique of algorithmic epistemology. The problem is not simply that algorithms can know too much. It is that they encourage a model of knowledge in which more data appear to promise more complete understanding. Lockwood's novel repeatedly separates those two things. The Portal produces enormous quantities of information, but its informational abundance does not necessarily deepen the subject's relation to others. The family narrative, by contrast, produces less explanatory certainty while intensifying the ethical demand to attend. The novel thus reverses the expected hierarchy: opacity can accompany greater ethical seriousness, while visibility can coexist with superficial knowledge.

The reading experience itself becomes part of this argument. The novel's fragments can be consumed quickly, but their accumulation eventually demands rereading, comparison, and reconsideration. The reader discovers that speed is not the same as comprehension. In this sense, Lockwood's form does not merely describe the attention economy; it offers a critical experience of it. The reader learns to distinguish between being supplied with information and being asked to understand. Narrative opacity names the point at which the novel interrupts that distinction and insists that some forms of knowledge require hesitation.

1.3. Jennifer Egan and the Limits of Database Consciousness

The Candy House begins from a different technological fantasy but arrives at a related formal problem. If Lockwood asks what happens when experience is absorbed into the endless circulation of the Portal, Egan asks what happens when memory itself becomes an accessible database. The technology "Own Your Unconscious" promises to externalize personal memory and permit unprecedented forms of access. Critics have understandably emphasized surveillance, datafication, digital identity, and the psychological consequences of networked life. Farhan, for example, reads the novel in relation to digitized selves and surveillance, while Mary and Tamilmani emphasize silence, noise, and digital overload [12,13]. These readings establish the technological stakes of Egan's fiction. The formal question, however, is what the novel does with the promise of total memory.

Adam Kelly's recent reading of The Candy House provides a particularly important point of departure for understanding the novel's engagement with digital technology. In "Trusting the Blockchain, Trusting the Novel in Jennifer Egan's The Candy House," Kelly reads the novel alongside the history of blockchain as a distributed ledger and asks how the novel's own "architectures of trust" respond to the possibility of a social world increasingly organized through technologically mediated records. His intervention shifts attention from technology as a merely representational object toward the social relations that technological systems reorganize. The present article builds on that insight but asks a different question: what happens formally when expanded technological access does not eliminate uncertainty? I argue that Egan's distributed narrative architecture repeatedly preserves precisely such uncertainty. The novel's multiplication of memories, voices, and perspectives generates more information without producing interpretive mastery; opacity therefore operates alongside trust as a formal limit to the fantasy of total access [14].

The novel refuses the expectation that a larger archive should produce a more coherent narrative. Its chapters move across characters, periods, voices, and genres. Narrative authority is dispersed rather than concentrated in a single consciousness. This structure is particularly important because the fictional technology promises the opposite: if every memory can be stored and retrieved, then the individual should become more legible, both to self and others. Egan's narrative form exposes the weakness of that assumption. Even when information accumulates, the relation among experiences remains interpretive. Memory is not a neutral database. It is selected, situated, mediated, and differently understood depending on who recalls it and from what temporal position.

The contrast between database and narrative becomes clearest when the novel repeatedly revisits experiences from different perspectives. A later account can revise an earlier one without simply replacing it. The reader is not encouraged to identify one version as the final truth. Instead, the novel creates a structure in which contradiction is productive. This is where Egan's polyphony becomes an ethics of opacity. The multiplication of viewpoints does not lead to omniscience. It demonstrates that additional perspectives can increase the complexity of a situation without producing a single definitive interpretation.

The chapter "Lulu the Spy, 2032" is especially revealing because its procedural atmosphere initially appears compatible with algorithmic logic. Surveillance, operational sequences, and institutional calculation suggest a world organized by systems of prediction and control. Yet the narrative repeatedly exposes the difference between procedural information and human judgment. Action emerges from conflicting motivations, affective attachments, uncertainty, and improvisation. The chapter therefore places computational rationality under pressure without simply rejecting it. Its formal organization asks what remains when procedures encounter persons who cannot be fully predicted by them [15].

The "counters" provide an even more direct challenge to the equation of access with knowledge. Their refusal to participate in the collective memory system is significant not because the novel idealizes privacy as a simple return to an earlier age, but because it tests the cultural assumption that disclosure is inherently liberating. If memories become universally accessible, then the distinction between having information about another person and knowing that person becomes dangerously unstable. The counters expose that instability. They insist, in effect, that there can be ethical value in keeping parts of a life outside circulation [7].

This position complicates the usual political vocabulary of privacy. Privacy is often described as the protection of information from unauthorized access. Egan's novel suggests a deeper question: what kind of person becomes possible when access itself is treated as a moral good? If every memory can be retrieved, then forgetting, withholding, and selective self-presentation may begin to appear as defects. The counters resist this norm. Their refusal preserves the possibility that a subject can have an interior life that is not simply another resource for social exchange. Opacity consequently becomes a condition of agency rather than an obstacle to communication.

The Levinasian implications are again important. Technological access can reduce the distance between people while simultaneously increasing the risk of reducing one person to the information available about them. Egan's characters do not become ethically transparent when their memories become technologically accessible. Instead, the novel shows that knowledge remains mediated by interpretation, context, desire, and the limits of perspective. The ethical subject therefore exceeds the archive. No database, however comprehensive, can convert a person into a final account of themselves.

Iser's theory of the gap acquires a different historical meaning here. In a conventional literary context, an interpretive gap requires the reader to supply relations that the text does not explicitly provide. In the Candy House, the gap persists even in a fictional world where technological systems appear capable of supplying almost unlimited information. Egan thus makes the reader confront a paradox: informational abundance can coexist with interpretive uncertainty. The novel's formal gaps demonstrate that the problem of understanding is not simply a shortage of data. Sometimes the accumulation of data changes the scale of the problem without solving it. The novel's polyphony therefore has an ethical as well as an aesthetic function. Readers must continually revise their assumptions because no single voice can stabilize the meaning of the whole. This demand for revision resembles the interpretive humility that literary ethics has long associated with serious reading, but it is also a contemporary intervention into cultures of automated recognition. Algorithms often seek to convert complexity into actionable categories.

Egan's narrative instead preserves incompatible possibilities. It asks readers to remain responsible to a situation without possessing it completely.

The significance of Egan's formal method becomes clearer when Kelly's account of trust is placed alongside the novel's narrative organization. If blockchain imagines a distributed record whose authority derives from its structure of verification and shared inscription, Egan's novel imagines a distributed archive while refusing to make its human subjects equally verifiable. Memories can circulate, but persons remain interpretively unfinished. This distinction is crucial to the present argument. Kelly identifies trust as a central problem of Egan's digital imaginary; I extend that problem into narrative form by arguing that the novel also makes opacity a condition for trust. Readers are repeatedly asked to accept that no perspective is final and that relational knowledge requires uncertainty rather than the elimination of it [16].

The novel's central challenge to algorithmic culture, then, is epistemological before it is technological. Surveillance matters because it changes what can be known, stored, and predicted; datafication matters because it turns lived experience into patterns that can be processed; but the deeper issue is the assumption that processing is equivalent to understanding. The Candy House repeatedly separates these terms. Memory can be retrieved without becoming meaningful. Information can be shared without producing intimacy. Multiple perspectives can be available without yielding a final truth. Narrative opacity names this difference and turns it into the novel's formal principle.

1.4. Toward a Post-Digital Ethics of Opacity

Read together, Lockwood and Egan show how contemporary American fiction can make the limits of algorithmic knowledge perceptible through form. Their novels differ in scale and technique, but both construct a tension between systems that promise

greater transparency and narratives that preserve irreducible uncertainty. The Portal and Own Your Unconscious are not identical technologies, yet they share an epistemological ambition: experience should become accessible, classifiable, retrievable, and therefore potentially predictable. The novels answer not by proposing ignorance but by distinguishing information from understanding.

This distinction also clarifies why the article uses "opacity" rather than simply "ambiguity." Ambiguity can describe a text with several possible meanings. Opacity describes a relation among subjectivity, knowledge, and power. A person is opaque when they cannot be exhausted by the information available about them. A memory is opaque when retrieval does not eliminate interpretation. A narrative is opaque when its formal organization prevents the reader from occupying a position of total explanatory mastery. Under algorithmic conditions, these forms of opacity become politically and ethically significant because computational systems increasingly organize access to people through the traces they leave behind. Such an argument should not be reduced to a romantic opposition between literature and technology. Neither novel rejects technological modernity outright. Lockwood's novel could not exist in its present form without the digital culture it analyzes, and Egan's novel is fascinated by the possibilities as well as the dangers of expanded access to memory. Their critique is more precise. They challenge the belief that technological expansion must be accompanied by epistemological expansion—that because more can be recorded, more can be known, and because more can be known, more can be ethically understood. Their formal structures expose the gaps in that sequence.

This intervention also revises the familiar account of fragmentation as a postmodern technique. The novels inherit fragmented form from earlier American and transatlantic traditions, but their historical situation changes what fragmentation can do. In postmodern criticism, fragmentation is frequently associated with skepticism toward unified meaning, stable subjectivity, or representational authority. Lockwood and Egan retain those possibilities while redirecting them toward a culture of prediction and data extraction. Their narratives do not merely question whether meaning is stable. They question whether stability itself has become a technological aspiration [17].

The distinction matters because algorithmic systems do not require perfect knowledge to exercise power. Prediction works through probabilities, correlations, and patterns. What matters is not that an algorithm understands a person in the humanistic sense, but that it can generate useful expectations about what that person may do. Literary opacity interrupts this predictive orientation by refusing to turn interpretive uncertainty into a temporary defect on the way to a final answer. A novel can insist that the future remain open even when the surrounding culture increasingly treats prediction as a form of value.

The ethics of reading therefore becomes central. To read Lockwood or Egan carefully is to practice a relation to uncertainty that differs from the habits of platform consumption. The reader cannot simply demand immediate resolution from the text. Instead, meaning develops through delay, revision, comparison, and the willingness to let incompatible possibilities remain active. This does not make literary reading inherently virtuous, nor does it place literature outside digital culture. It does, however, show how a formal experience can cultivate a different relation to knowledge. The reader learns that uncertainty need not be an error condition.

In Lockwood, that lesson is tied to the ethical limits of representing another person's suffering. The narrator's inability to make her niece fully transparent becomes part of the novel's resistance to the logic of circulation. In Egan, the same lesson appears through the failure of the memory archive to produce total understanding. The archive expands, but the subject does not become fully available. The two novels consequently approach opacity from opposite directions: Lockwood moves from excessive circulation toward an experience that resists circulation, while Egan moves from excessive preservation toward the discovery that preservation cannot eliminate alterity.

The comparison also suggests a broader account of contemporary American fiction. If contemporary literature is understood as a historically unstable field rather than a fixed period, then these novels offer one way of describing what has changed in the literary environment since the late twentieth century. The problem of fragmented narrative is no longer only the problem of representation after postmodernism. It is also the problem of representation within systems that can store, rank, circulate, and predict enormous quantities of human behavior. Literary form becomes one place where the consequences of that transformation can be tested. What is at stake, then, is not an ethics of ignorance but an ethics of non-totalization. To recognize that another person cannot be completely known is not to abandon knowledge; it is to refuse a form of knowledge that treats completeness as the highest ethical good. Lockwood and Egan suggest that intimacy can coexist with limits, memory with forgetting, and interpretation with unresolved uncertainty. Their novels make opacity valuable because it protects the possibility that persons remain more than the categories through which institutions and technologies attempt to understand them.

The term "post-digital" is useful here only if it does not imply that digital culture has ended. It names a condition in which digital mediation has become so ordinary that the distinction between online and offline experience is no longer sufficient. Lockwood's movement from the Portal to family grief and Egan's movement between networked memory and embodied relationships both reveal this condition. Their novels do not describe a future after digital culture; they explore what literature can do when digital culture has become the environment in which subjectivity is formed. Narrative opacity is one answer: a way of making limits visible from inside the system.

2. Conclusion

No One Is Talking About This and The Candy House make a shared claim about the contemporary novel: literature can challenge algorithmic culture not only by representing its technologies but by reorganizing the reader's relation to knowledge. Lockwood's discontinuous prose initially reproduces the velocity of platform circulation before transforming interruption and incompleteness into forms of ethical attention. Egan's dispersed narrative architecture similarly reproduces the fantasy of an accessible database while demonstrating that the accumulation of memories and perspectives cannot eliminate the alterity of persons. In both cases, form becomes the medium through which technological assumptions are tested. The argument also places these novels within a broader history of contemporary American fiction. Rather than treating their fragmentation as a residual form of postmodernism, the article has situated it within a literary field shaped by the changing relations among markets, genres, technology, and subjectivity. Kelly's account of Egan's development is particularly valuable because it demonstrates how formal experimentation can register transformations in the American literary field without being reducible to a single period label [2,3].

Hungerford's caution about periodizing the contemporary similarly reminds us that recent literature is better understood through historical tensions than through a single aesthetic category [1]. Lockwood and Egan belong to this unsettled field, but they also help define one of its central problems: how to represent human experience when the surrounding culture increasingly treats prediction as knowledge.

Narrative opacity offers a way of naming their response. It does not celebrate confusion, reject evidence, or romanticize privacy. Instead, it marks the point at which literary form refuses the conversion of human experience into a fully consumable informational object. The novels demonstrate that more information does not automatically produce more understanding and that visibility can coexist with epistemic and ethical failure. Their formal strategies therefore preserve a space for interpretation in a culture increasingly organized by classification, personalization, and prediction.

The significance of this claim extends beyond the two novels. As contemporary American fiction continues to engage artificial intelligence, platform capitalism, surveillance, data governance, and changing forms of memory, literary criticism will need to attend not only to what technologies appear in novels but also to how technological conditions reshape the formal possibilities of narrative. The question is not simply whether literature can resist technology. It is whether literature can make visible the limits of the epistemologies through which technological systems organize social life. Lockwood and Egan suggest that it can.

Ultimately, their novels defend a modest but consequential proposition: ethical understanding may begin where total knowledge ends. In an environment that increasingly rewards prediction and treats uncertainty as something to be managed, narrative opacity preserves the possibility that another person, another memory, or another future will exceed the patterns already available. The value of the contemporary novel lies partly in that excess. By requiring readers to remain with what cannot be completely resolved, Lockwood and Egan turn uncertainty into a formal resource and an ethical practice. Their fiction does not offer an escape from algorithmic culture. It offers a way of reading within it without surrendering the value of what remains unknown. [18-30].

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