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Scenes of Vulnerability in *You* Narratives

Winterson's *PowerBook* and Egan's *Black Box*

Abstract

Framed within the current knowledge age you-culture, textual you *is first discussed as a philosophical and ethical address. A specific textual analysis follows to investigate a narrative mode that the existing narratological taxonomy finds it hard to accommodate, while authors, aiming at a new form of realism, have interestingly recontextualized to fit the 21st century hyper-communicative age. Based on exposure rather than closure,* you *narratives enact the structure of address through the Protean nature of the pronoun* you *(singular and plural, inclusive and exclusive) and they bring to the fore the susceptibility of the communicative process, through intersubjective ambiguity and failure as "others make moral claims upon us, address moral demands to us, […] ones that we are not free to refuse" (Butler 2004). Presented as yet-to-be shaped vulnerable art objects, these narratives are in form and content about the experience of being affected and constituted by the other's address "first and foremost against our will or […] prior to the formation of our will" (Butler 2004) in ways that may blur the ontological borders between addresser and addressee. The very idea of interactivity as the way self and other (human or nonhuman) come into being and determine each other's responsibility and ethical obligations are what this paper tackles, offering a close reading of* you *in the speculative novella by Jennifer Egan,* Black Box *(2012), and by confronting a quest for love, identity and freedom in a virtual computer-mediated communication in Jeanette Winterson's novel* The PowerBook *(2000).*

Keywords: *you narrative, nonhuman, vulnerability, computer-mediated communication, Anthropocene, narratology, markedness*

> *The 'you' is ignored by the individualistic doctrines, which are too preoccupied with praising the rights of the 'I', and the 'you' is masked by a Kantian form of ethics that is only capable of staging an 'I' that addresses itself as a familiar 'you' [un 'io' che si dà solamente del 'tu'].*
>
> (Adriana Cavarero, *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood*)

Typically, a pronoun of address brings to the fore an idea of exposure. It is a call that takes each of us out of the crowd and encourages some sort of engagement and/or participation.

In 2006, *Time* magazine chose the word *You* for its "Person of the year" cover. The choice was meant to acknowledge citizen journalism and more generally the millions of internet users and net surfers who anonymously contributed their contents to the web, especially via websites such as Wikipedia, YouTube, MySpace, Facebook and many more. Was this an acknowledgment of a you-culture? In that cover (see Fig. 1), the computer is the stage on which the second-person pronoun is foregrounded (bold is applied).

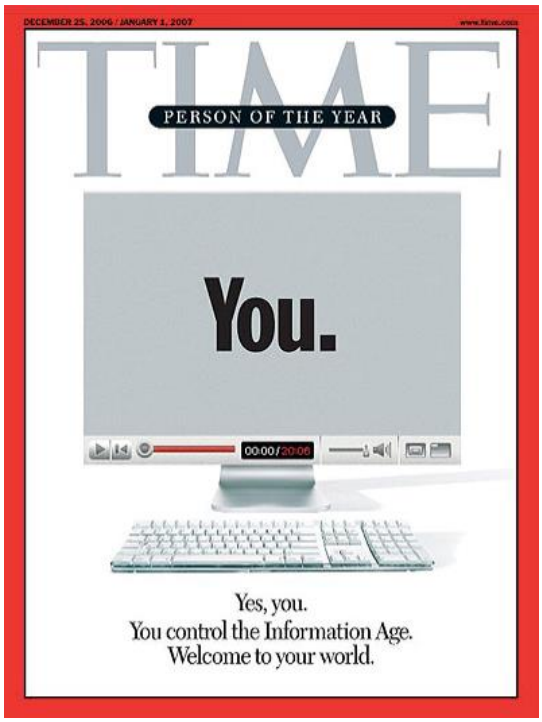

Fig. 1: 2006 *Time* magazine cover, https://time.com/vault/year/2006. Last visited 30/10/2020.

Is that centre-stage position truly celebrating people and the human vs the nonhuman? Or is it, indeed, quite the opposite? A faceless and bodiless entity is on show, whatever is left is not human enough, based on a simplistic ego-rewarding mechanism. It is more likely to be identified as nonhuman. The position of the computer is dominant and has reduced the human to a grammar category, a pronoun of address, a mere verbal code entity, if not just an app within a PC. Humans are meant to rule over machines, but it is almost trivial to state that the *Time* magazine cover shows otherwise: this powerful tool is portrayed as the one which manages human beings and their activity via an alluring approach or a recruiting mechanism. The (power to) address and order/limit issues are left open to some extent and made ambiguous relatively to whatever *you* culture is being presented or promoted. As American historian Timothy James LeCain argues: "Indeed, if this age has anything of value to teach us, it may well be that humans

are not in control, that we do not create our world in any conscious sense but are swept along by powerful material things that we only partly comprehend" (2015, 23).

The implication is puzzling and threefold. First, there is this inability to fully master and therefore manage material things, be them human and/or nonhuman entities. Second, there is a ceaseless feeling of being carried away or swept along by a strong unknown addresser, a voiceless typing source pushing messages, notifications, reminders. Third, a new recurring anxiety has taken hold that of being disconnected and either being invisible, anonymous or, maybe worse, unreachable and unable to reach—that is, disconnected. In brief, the ever-on-call ecology which has become routine to many has exposed almost all to a self-feeding traumatic experience based on a number of risks and eventually on the ultimate threat of a connection failure.

A pronoun of address is also a reminder of how our actions are always partly out of our hands and how at least part of such actions is ruled by some sort of *other*, within or outside us, within or attached to a nonhuman entity or a machine. It is a reminder of "our fundamental dependency on the other, the fact that we cannot exist without addressing the other and without being addressed by the other" (Butler 2005, 33); the various *others* we are (or are not) tied to, whether human or nonhuman, whether the result of social and cultural conditioning, or historical and geographical restraints. What is conditioning or binding—morally, socially, historically—is often not transparent, tends to be opaque or no longer in sight because it is far too familiar or too deeply ingrained and typically gets more and more out of grasp as well as out of focus.

In an expanded hi-tech communication environment, in which matter, machines, nonhumans and humans are often engaged in intensive exchanges that blur their agency boundaries and area of interaction, the very idea of address is made more complex. Consider, for instance, when we are emailing or texting. We believe we are interacting with our addressee(s), but in fact we are first and foremost addressing a machine, an invisible intermediary which can easily become a tangible intruder with which we may be forced to deal whenever communication fails or a technical issue occurs, such as bugs, network errors, spam etc. The machine, or rather the software running it, becomes an unwanted *other*, a *you* we cannot but interact with and give priority to if we intend to resume our conversation—it is no longer only a matter of who or what should be given priority to, as there is no choice unless we move into a different channel or medium. The human and nonhuman coexist at best by collaborating and at worst by misunderstanding each other.

What stimuli are we exposed to when we are addressed? According to Judith Butler, the "situation of being addressed" is the one we have a poor grasp of:

> If we think that moral authority is about finding one's will and standing by it [...] we miss the situation of being addressed, the demand that comes from elsewhere, sometimes a nameless elsewhere, by which our obligations are articulated and pressed upon us. Indeed, this conception of what is morally binding is not one that I give myself; it does not proceed from my autonomy or my reflexivity. (2004, 130)

What is morally binding can have many sources—family, friends, professional relationships, neighbourhood, to name a few—and "has to do with how we are addressed by others in ways that we cannot avert or avoid" (Butler 2004, 130). If the nonhuman operates independently of human will, belief, or desires, it is bound to be a feature of many subjects that we have been calling humans for some time now. Human beings move into a nonhuman condition as they misrepresent, misinterpret, misconceive and consequently choose not via critical thinking but by relying on social, cultural, historical as well as technological constrains and conditionings. Because of intersubjective ambiguity and failure, as Butler states, "the other's address constitutes us first and foremost against our will, or perhaps put more appropriately, prior to the formation of our will" (2004, 130).

By admitting or obliterating addressee(s), by acknowledging addressers as peers or as subjects, humans or nonhumans, depicting them as good or evil creatures, through the semantic of power (Brown and Gilman 1960) of "inclusive and exclusive you" (both singular and plural), textual *you* flexibility contributes either to a pervasive sense of strong obligation and/or to literal and metaphorical menace. Conceptually, this is where the scenes of vulnerability announced in the title stem from. Such scenes are singled out from two 21st century *you* narratives serving as case studies on the second-person narrative mode: namely *The PowerBook* (2000) by British author Jeanette Winterson, a traditional print fiction, framed within a computer-mediated communication (CMC); and the Twitter-born novella *Black Box* (2012), written by Pulitzer Prize-winner Jennifer Egan. Relying on narratology and linguistics, the present inquiry intends to offer some insight into how the use of textual *you* alongside recurring lexical and grammar structures—e.g. tense, modality, and imperative mood—problematises the human vs nonhuman as a continuum rather than as a dichotomy. Winterson's and Egan's fiction, individually and in two different manners, offers evidence that allows us to mirror and reflect "against human exceptionalism" (Grusin 2015, x) as they variously conceive of the nonhuman "as animals, plants, organisms, climatic systems, technologies, or ecosystems" and, at least in certain circumstances, of those humans that operate independently of human will, belief, or desires. Such *you* narratives highlight the many ways this can be achieved in representation by humanizing or dehumanizing the subject.

The word scene therefore evokes *drama* and points at the strong dialogic quality these narratives embody and at the disruption textual *you* brings about in narratology. The second-person narrative mode allows looking both inwards and outwards the narrative itself, building an almost *written to the moment* fiction that warps the classical narratological concepts of voice and time. By such staging of facts and responses, the reader is confronted with the unpredictable and therefore implies little planning in any human reaction. What is narrated is more likely to be the result of an agent caught off guard: an immediate or impromptu (re)action. Agents are shown at their most vulnerable state, resulting from an intrinsic subject opacity to their own self and as they are simultaneously confronted with whatever environmental, societal, moral or nonhuman (f)actors are affecting them. What is compelling about the *you* narrative mode is that the human vulnerability it depicts goes hand in hand with an equally vulnerable text. As already mentioned and as will be discussed in the two case studies, textual *you* puts diegetic techniques and devices under siege and, along with co-occurring grammar components, it generates a form built on non-standard, marked semantic and pragmatic structures, that is, an exposed and/or vulnerable form of textuality. The narrative and the way it unfolds garner prominence as the highly metamorphic second-person pronoun of address integrates with marked structures, confirming and expanding on what Richardson labelled "unnatural," by which he meant "a brief inventory of a number of innovative contemporary uses of narrators and narration, including narration by animals, small children, corpses, machines, and a Minotaur, which move ever further away from conventional human speakers" (2006, x). The unnatural is the nonhuman alongside the human.

Despite an obvious tension on the origin of the uttering voice as well as on the ever renewed need to disambiguate the textual *you*, second-person narratives are grounded on closeness and reduced mediation that creates, implies, evokes and even demands a sense of intimacy and of belonging—though potentially a forced one. Pulling in opposite directions, towards the lack of a voice (and of whatever authority goes with it) on the one hand and the "collapse of reader address and character reference" (Schofield 1997, 98) on the other, the second-person narrative mode claims itself as a way to experience self-reflection as well as to revise the author-reader roles while processing the reading. Rather than insisting on regarding *you* narrative works as experimental writing, the present work aims at focusing on the shift they elicit towards how and why they challenge the ontology of the who—i.e. the character in focus rather than a proper subject or agent—and of its human vs nonhuman condition. In order to provide more context for the analysis and discussion of Winterson and Egan's narratives, the first section expands on the *you* culture concept and the role played by collaboration in a hypermediated environment, while

the second section, drawing from narratology, opens with an overview of two of the current taxonomies before delving into the two fictional works.

1. Is there a *you* culture?

What was the 2006 *Time*'s cover communicating? At the bottom of the central *You* image, a caption read, "Yes, you. You control the information age. Welcome to your world." As confirmed by Stephen Koepp, the then TIME magazine's deputy managing editor, a relatively recent phenomenon was being celebrated, one not dissimilar to previous kinds of participatory culture, but more specifically defined as 'collective intelligence' (Lévy 2013, 99-108) and also circulated as 'crowdsourcing.' Lévy's collective intelligence is construed as a highly positive process "emerging in the new digital communication environment" (2013, 99), based on a transformation of "implicit personal and local know-how into explicit knowledge codified in a collective memory" (2013, 107). Crowdsourcing, on the contrary, may be a more controversial idea bringing to the fore both positive and negative readings, related to economic results obtained by relying on massive work, produced by a large number of people volunteering their spare time, abilities, and skills.

Leaving aside a polarised reading of these two overlapping concepts, what seems most relevant is that both promote information age as a *you* culture in which anonymous people become visible and reachable, ubiquity is facilitated by a pervasive digital communication environment, and agency becomes a controversial issue about who holds the power to act and/or to address. Real and virtual worlds merge more and more as what is carried out via the internet impacts actual life emotionally, physically, morally and sometimes even in practical terms. If crowdsourcing can be isolated as at least one expression of a *you* culture, what makes it distinct from previous ones is the request it encompasses: a *you* address to the unknown multitude sitting behind a screen, either a potential customer or a still unacknowledged expert or amateur, skilled or passionate enough to become productively exploitable. Of course, people have always volunteered for collective purposes but the way the relationship unfolds has shifted. The voiceless request is endorsed by large organisations and/or brands; the deal is struck via a click and the human is turned into one of many anonymous small operative actors/actants in a chain of widespread interconnected actions. The revolutionary idea is to turn exposure into something of value not only in economic terms. The more any *you* is addressable, the higher their online reputation—unlike traditional reputation, the online one related to crowdsourcing activities is based on algorithms that take into account adversarial workers/strategies. Individuals can either feed into a reachable and useful crowd or, turned unconnected therefore unworthy, be left

out of the system, unrecognized, unaddressed and *unaddressable*. As new tasks emerge with the growing popularity of crowdsourcing services, the *you* culture elicits an ever renewed and renewable call. Based on extensive crowdsourcing, already very popular in the early 2000s, such *you* culture is now a living entity, if a conceptual one, "capable of reproduction and evolution" (Maturana and Varela 1973, 82-84). As a consequence, competition for survival becomes fiercer while traditional moral and ethical rules fall apart: humans are no longer a starting point but are themselves nonhuman results, often turned into algorithms, thus nonhuman *products* among other items, matters, machines and systems. As will be argued, the two case studies here investigated emerge from this specific *you* culture context and bear little or no resemblance to previous textual *you* fictional works such as Michel Butor's *La modification* (1957), Edna O'Brien's *A Pagan Place* (1970), *Self Help* (1985) by Lorrie Moore or *The Brain of Katherine Mansfield* (1988) by Bill Manhire, to mention a few highly discussed second-person fiction works. The narrative mode may seem similar at first glance, but in fact bears all traces of the 21st century pervasively communicative world that authors are willing to explore and represent. In the next part, two main taxonomies are presented, one by Brian Richardson and the other by David Herman. These function as reference for the case studies that follow in 2.1 and 2.2.

2. What *you* in a *you* narrative? Two taxonomies in two case studies

Literary criticism has for a long time paid scarce attention or completely disregarded textual *you* as merely experimental, "forcefully compelling and alienating" (Schofield 1997, 96), or "unnatural" (Richardson 2006). It is in such alleged unnaturalness that lies an intricate if multifarious narrative device that garnered attention mainly between the late 80s and early 90s, especially within narratology. Various scholarly attempts at tackling second-person narratives, since Morrissette's preliminary study in 1965, started to appear and several taxonomies were offered (Hopkins and Perkins 1981; Helmut Bonheim 1982; Margolin 1990; Richardson 1994, 2006; Herman 1994; Fludernik 1994; Schofield 1997).[1] Among them, two in particular, combining linguistics and a narratological approach, have proved more efficient, namely Brian Richardson's three intentionally broad categories accompanied by frequently co-

[1] In 2003, Matt DelConte contributed his own model of narrative in "Why You Can't Speak. Second Person Narration, Voice, and a New Model for Understanding Narrative" (204-219). By analysing "the relationships among multiple variables in the narrative transmission" (210), based on "the triad of narrator, protagonist, and narratee," DelConte developed five "basic configurations" of narration, i.e. Non-coincident Narration, Completely-Coincident Narration and three Partially-coincident narrations, in which different pairs are in focus, namely narrator/protagonist, narrator/narrative, and narratee/protagonist (211).

occurring tenses and David Herman's five functional modalities mainly focusing on deixis. Richardson identifies three *you* forms: *standard*, *hypothetical*, and *autotelic*. In the *standard* category, he argues, "a story is told, usually in the present tense, about a single protagonist who is referred to in the second-person; *you* often designates the narrator and the narratee as well" (Richardson 2006, 20). The second *you* form, that is the *hypothetical*, also called "subjunctive," "recipe form" or the "pseudo-guidebook" style, following Morrissette's labelling (1965, 11), has three typical and recognisable features: "the consistent use of the imperative, the frequent employment of the future tense, and the unambiguous distinction between the narrator and the narratee. The protagonist is a possible future version of the narratee," (Richardson 2006, 29). Finally, the *autotelic* form is "the direct address to a *you* that is at times the actual reader of the text and whose story is juxtaposed to and can merge with the characters of the fiction" (Richardson 2006, 18).

Richardson's broadness is useful as a general reference and for the attention it devotes to recurring tenses and moods. Herman's five-category partition is more specific and focuses on the ambiguities that arise from personal pronoun deictic reference, allowing for a less homogeneous but deeper investigation within the *you* address species that includes a "variety of grammatical and rhetorical resources" (Herman 1994, 384) as well. Despite "the sometimes fugitive elements of what we might call the phenomenology of reading *you*," (Herman 1994, 382) five modalities can be detected: the "generalized you," that is, *you* as a less formal option than the pronoun *one*; the "fictional reference," i.e. *you* as fictional protagonist both narrator and narratee; the "fictionalized or horizontal address" in which *you* points to other characters in an intradiegetic address; the "apostrophic or vertical address," namely *you* as reader in an extradiegetic address. Finally, there is the "doubly deictic *you,*" by which two or more deictic roles overlap and an intra- and extra-diegetic address alters the traditional diegetic borders. As a consequence, a larger array of discourse functions is fulfilled by complicating "the modal status of what the term designates, given that the pronoun has begun to embed virtuality within virtuality, to insert address by other fictional personages within the ongoing self-address of the protagonist" (Herman 1994, 384).

A textual *you* has the potential to unveil and insist on the susceptibility of the communicative process, disrupting the familiar and no longer perceived parts of any exchange. A potential out-of-control scenario, or condition of vulnerability, emerges whereby the narrative is almost called to a halt and the reader requested to (re)act. Ultimately, there is an unsettling force the second-person narrative exercises, that is, "a rupture of unitary subjectivity that a reader experience as an epiphany" (Schofield 1997, 110).

Whatever universal or individual factors trigger a narrative that "is defined not by who is speaking but by who is listening" (DelConte 2003, 204), there is a need to review its applications, linguistic structures, and scope. As moral philosopher Stephen Darwall points out:

> Although second-person address is always also first-personal, it is never merely first-personal. One can occupy a first-person perspective, whether singular or plural, without explicitly addressing anyone. (2006, 10)

The frequent attitude to flatten the second-person narration to a self-address or a generalisation equals to disregarding the act of choice that shapes the entire discourse and its agency: *whose words are those uttered? To whom?* Moreover, since the late 90s, the communicative environment has drastically changed, the unexpected and upsetting coexist and some authors have taken the new technologies into account stylistically and conceptually. As Timothy LeCain argues from his neo-materialist perspective, this is "an age of powerful carbon-based fuels that have helped to create ways of thinking and acting that humans now find exceedingly difficult to escape" (2015, 1); an age in which "humans and their cultures are best understood as the products of their material environments not its masters" (LeCain 2015, 2). In such context, it should not surprise that the flexibility and mutability of textual *you* has been selected as an apt means to investigate that sense of shock the current era brings along in its loss of control and the related sense of exposure and issues of trauma. Especially when told in the present tense, it could be argued that *you* narratives instantiate vulnerability[2] both in form and content, or rather in content through markedness of form, as they encode a non-standard storytelling whereby an odd interaction solicits the addressee's action while constantly reminding of the addresser's undisclosed or anonymous identity. Set in the present, the narration is magnified, brought closer, and scrutinised as it unfolds via proximity. By being pointed at as a complicit and/or a narratee (unless otherwise stated, this is always possible as the doubly deictic *you* shows), the reader is unsettled in their own role, i.e. disrupted and exposed, and thus also made vulnerable. But what vulnerability is being foregrounded and elicited in the reader? David Herman tackles textual *you* variability in narratology in a deep and thorough analysis in his study of Edna O'Brien's novel, *A Pagan Place* (1970)—a second-person narrative. The investigated narrative features several "species of self address" (Herman 1994, 385), in which the idea that the character is seen from the outside gains ground in propositions that "exceed

[2] Brian Richardson investigates second-person fiction that shows a main character struggling to achieve a sense of self in "I Etcetera: On the Poetics and Ideology of Multipersoned Narratives." *Style* 28.3 (1994): 312-328.

the frame of the fiction itself" (Herman 1994, 385) and would unlikely characterise as a self-address:

> Textual *you* functions not (or not only) as discourse particle relaying and linking the various components of a fictional protagonist's self address, but (also) as a form of address that exceeds the frame of the fiction itself. *You* designates anyone who has ever been or might conceivably be upset at the slaughter of animals or embarrassed by the homeliness of her coat when she stands alone for the first time on a crowded city street. (Herman 1994, 386)

The vulnerability at stake with the sort of textual *you* presented by Herman, as will be discussed, cannot be simply construed in its traditional negative connotation. As a matter of fact, being vulnerable turns out to be a resource for any human being. In the last ten years or so, being vulnerable has been re-conceptualised and its positive connotation has gained currency in various fields (e.g. in social sciences, see Brené Brown 2010; in law, see Martha Albertson Fineman 2008; and in literary criticism, see Jean-Michel Ganteau 2015). Traditionally, the vulnerables have been depicted as those in a condition of weakness and dependency—for example, women and children have often been socially and culturally construed as vulnerable subjects—though, as the argument goes, the more someone is labelled as vulnerable the more that person is denied an active role in the community and has access to fewer options. This brings in responsibility, both at the individual and the social level. More recent developments around vulnerability (mentioned above) discuss both sides of the concept, the typical powerlessness condition it evokes and the potential empowering process it may trigger: those who are open about being vulnerable can face issues from minor conditions like shame, guilt and worthlessness to more problematic ones like wounds and even trauma to regain agency. By assessing their vulnerable part, these people start a process that makes them creative and connected again, allowing them to get engaged and morally bound. Being vulnerable is thus being exposed and somewhat matches with the idea of being addressed and singled out, but in such a way that allows both for self-reflection and more broadly to discuss moral and ethical issues of the era in which we are immersed.

2.1 Jeannette Winterson: An identity limbo in a computer-mediated you *narrative*

Obsessively focusing on an intentionally undefined relationship between pseudo-human and nonhuman forms of *otherness*, in Winterson's *The PowerBook* (2000)[3] textual *you* creates an addresser-addressee dynamic that never ceases to remain unstable and on the edge of being

[3] From here onwards *The PowerBook* will be referred to as *TPB*.

interrupted or jeopardized. A first-person narrative voice, the so-called "language costumier" (Winterson 2000, 1), offers disguise by telling stories, often love stories, to an unidentified *you*. Night is the favoured time for their exchange, carried out via emails and ambiguously based on a relationship that is first presented as a commercial one but never ceases to potentially become a love affair. Irony is widely exploited, as the deranged and simultaneously prolific nature of computer-mediated relationships between human beings—but also nonhuman, be it a machine or the book itself—is portrayed and issues of dependency and independence arise.

Trust is under siege, left in the hand of an unreliable narrator and an unstable diegetic frame where *I* and *you* are constantly redefined and easily swapped (at a metanarrative level as well). To depict the illusion of an ever-reaching connectedness, Winterson portrays benefits, threats and pitfalls of virtual relationships and identities, whereby the "language costumier" (Winterson 2000, 1) may be (mis)guided and inspired, as in a love relationship, by a lover/client/reader, but may also suddenly be deserted and consequently deprived of that mutually defining identity.

> Night.
> I logged on to the Net. There were no e-mails for me. You had run out on the story.
> Run out on me. Vanished.
> I typed in your address.
> Nothing.
> I set one of the research engines to find you.
> Nothing.
> Here I am like a penitent in a confessional. I want to tell you how I feel, but there's nobody on the other side of the screen. (Winterson 2000, 73)

Not clearly cut to fit in one of Richardson's categories, or Herman's for that matter, Winterson's novel is a two-tier narrative moving back and forth from a computer-mediated correspondence to a first-person narration. Designed as an unconventional intertwined structure, *TPB* defies narrative linearity by being organised in twenty-five chapters that the table of contents—labelled *MENU* (upper case in the original text)—distinctly distributes into two groups: eleven are introduced by lowercase titles and fourteen by uppercase titles. The chapters are distributed unevenly: the lowercase ones are interspersed with the uppercase ones. As typographically and semantically marked, such paratexts suggest that the two groups of short texts belong to separate categories and can also be read as independent from one another, though each is also expanded in scope and content when the two are combined together. As a matter of fact, this structure stands as a further articulation on the *I/you* dependency and empowering condition of *The PowerBook*: whatever is familiar is opaque but once it has been made visible as non-

standard, it can be perceived as a signal again and elicit an active response on the reader's part. Having regained attention, the identity of the chapters can fulfil a new function and expand on the way the book is encoded and on its ruling tools. In the former group of chapters, the eleven *I/you* interactions are based on closely knit email-mediated dialogues, often very short. Typically longer, the other fourteen chapters are seemingly unrelated short stories that the "language costumier" addresses to an unknown *you*—like in *One Thousand and One Nights*, though the life-threatening aspect is less explicit. Textual *you* is the second feature contributing to *TPB*'s instability: first, through the double nature of the pronoun, which is singular and plural, as well as inclusive and exclusive; and second, through its shifting between referents which brings forward a sort of restlessness. Besides, Winterson's *you*, a gender-neutral client/reader and lover, sets the narrative in motion. Presented as a reply to an email asking for *"Freedom for a night"* (Winterson 2000, 3, italics in the original) the narrative is introduced as a deal to "be somebody else" or "to be transformed" (Winterson 2000, 4) through stories. The actual reader learns about the request through a series of reiterated reported speech clauses "You say [...]" which gain the strength of directives or commands. As a consequence, the first-person narrator is perceived less as the agent and more and more as the addressee of the email exchange meant to respond to an on-demand task. Therefore, the power of address is intentionally depicted as reciprocal, at least at the beginning. Then, the *I* reverses the roles. As the agent, the "language costumier" provides instructions and a warning to the addressee/client, having the lexical power of a threat as the addressee/client is reduced to a guinea pig-like item in a scientific lab.

> This is where the story starts. Here, in these long lines of laptop DNA. Here we take your chromosomes, twenty-three pairs, and alter your height, eyes, teeth, sex. This is an invented world. You can be free for one night.
> Undress.
> Take off your clothes. Take off your body. Hang them up behind the door. Tonight we can go deeper than disguise. (Winterson 2000, 4).

Almost refashioning the nature of the service and undressing the human beings of their building blocks ("your chromosomes") by replacing them with some sort of *primitives,*[4] the boundaries

[4] In *Second Life*, a free 3D virtual world-game, everything can be created from scratch with primitives, atom-like 3D polygonal shapes, e.g. cubes, spheres, and cylinders which, aggregated, compose more complex objects. It is a highly creative meta-universe where users can build, connect, and chat with others. Users experience this virtual world via their own avatars, which can be designed by combining primitives but also various human and nonhuman material aspects, features, and abilities. Avatars can be part human beings and part animals or machines or anything users can think of.

between human and nonhuman are shrunken; freedom, respect, and accountability are a matter of deep revision. If the body, in the first part, is reduced to a machine-like structure taken down to its pieces, the mind and the imagination are involved in a more sensual and metaphoric pleasure-plus-pain cocktail. Unreliability is also conveyed through a first-person plural *we* that is menacingly exclusive: "we take your chromosomes," as if the *I* will perform whatever experimental transformation in a team of so-to-speak experts. However, in the last line, "we can go deeper than disguise," the first-person plural pronoun is being restored within the *I/you* relationship as a dualist inclusive pronoun (Scheibman 2004). A mutual consent and complicitous feeling ensue as if a new *creature*—human or nonhuman—and thus the very story can be generated, evoking a Frankensteinian experiment or a doppelgänger figure like Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde;* for the transformation process is, if only metaphorically, conceptualised as a collaboration between the humanities and science. "It's only a story, you say. […] [C]reation story, love story, horror, crime, the strange story of you and I. The alphabet of my DNA shapes certain words, but the story is not told. I have to tell it myself" (Winterson 2000, 4). The creature or the story, or maybe the creature-story,[5] comes across as both the result of some sort of and some unexpected turn or error that may occur in the laboratorial process. Agency and accountability are pivotal concerns, given the intentional lack of clarity about who is in control and whose *will* such a subject is fulfilling when the "language costumier" warns: "if I start this story [...] It may change under my hands" (Winterson 2000, 30).

Precariousness is presented as an inner feature of a highly technologically mediated world but also as the typical tool-kit of a writer whose language is "living not inert" (Winterson 1996, 44) and will enable the author to "create a separate reality and her atoms and her gases are words" (Winterson 1996, 44). Among the many shifts the second-person pronoun *you* undergoes within the correspondence-like chapters, there is also a fall into the trap of generalization where *you* is suddenly *one* or *anyone*. This happens after the storyteller has lost track of the

[5] The creature-story concept takes us back to the title of Winterson's novel, *The PowerBook*, i.e. the power of stories or of storytelling, as well as to Apple's MacBook, also known as PowerBook—that is, stereotypically (at least up to some years ago) portable cutting-edge technology. One more meaning the title implies is that of machine-generated narratives and/or poems—some of which date as early as the mid-70s. For further reference see two electronic literature archives, the ELO's collections and/or or the Anthology of European Electronic Literature. We can also retrieve an intertextual reference that leads to Douglas Coupland's novel *Microserfs* (1995) and its main character's concern about machines and their subconscious: "So I stare at my MultiSync and my PowerBook and wonder … 'What's going through their heads?'" (1995, 44, ellipsis and italics in the original). A concern that, in Coupland's novel, turns into a series of pages interrupting the narrative by collecting "random words" that the narrator, Dan, feeds into "a desktop file labelled SUBCONSCIOUS" (1995, 45, small caps in the original).

addressee/client. Deserted by its addressee/reader/lover, the storyteller is locked-in "a world inventing itself" (Winterson 2000, 73). No longer able to escape it, the "language costumier" discloses the vulnerability of an identity that cannot be whole unless it interacts with some other entity. Regarded as only temporary, such loss does not prevent the "language costumier" to pursue its story-making activity within the limbo the web provides. Thanks to undefined *I*s (narrators) and ambiguously fe/male-shifting *you*s (narratees/readers), regardless of and beyond traditional human logic, the "language costumier" claims: "I'm looking for the meaning inside the data. That's why I trawl my screen like a beachcomber—looking for you, looking for me, trying to see through the disguise." (Winterson 2000, 74). Winterson's ability to play on shifting identities and on role reversal magnifies a *you* culture made of renewable entities trapped in old and new forms of constraints and duties, in variations of respect and accountability in a fluctuating ecology: "I warned you that the story might change under my hands. I forgot that the storyteller changes too. I was under your hands" (Winterson 2000, 95). The power of address and the subject in control are no longer identifiable. While textual *you* insists on the susceptibility of the communicative process, the intersubjective ambiguity increases, and human failure seems incapable of stopping a self-feeding story-making system that becomes itself nonhuman as it remediates ancient and classic love tales.[6] Winterson's textual *you* brings to the fore how, in the twenty-first-century multimediated contexts, our actions are made ever more dynamic and therefore puzzling within new media and along with a new flexibility, which eventually demands that we accept a lesser rather than fuller control on agency and a weaker ability to deal with its unexpected outcomes.

> Night. The search engines are quiet.
> I keep throwing stories overboard, like a message in a bottle, hoping you'll read them, hoping you'll respond.
> You don't respond.
> I warned you that the story might change under my hands. I forgot that the storyteller changes too. I was under your hands. (Winterson 2000, 95)

[6] Winterson reshapes the affair between Lancelot and Guinevere in a chapter titled "SEARCH" (2000, 75-86, capitals in the original), as well as that between Paolo and Francesca told by Boccaccio and by Dante (as the author highlights). Winterson labels one chapter "great and ruinous lovers" (lower case title in the original) listing more popular unfortunate couples, fictional and non-fictional, such as Tristan and Isolde, Siegfried and Brünnhilde, Romeo and Juliet, Cathy and Heathcliff, Vita Sackville-West and Violet, Oscar Wilde and Bosie, Burton and Taylor.

In a slippage of identity and responsibility, a larger part is played and ruled by some sort of indistinct nonhuman *others* inhabiting the limbo of the web, that is, those we create for ourselves as new identities. Forgotten of or abandoned, these identities or virtual personas keep existing and one day or another will come back at us as zombies, reminders of a previous attempt or a discarded project as well as those that have incidentally spun off while communities are constantly shaped and reshaped.

> Night.
> I'm sitting at my screen reading this story. In turn, the story reads me.
> Did I write this story, or was it you, writing through me, the way the sun sparks the fire through a piece of glass? (Winterson 2000, 247)

Consequently, what is binding—morally, socially, historically—becomes less and less readable and gradually out of reach. As if blurred, whatever the point of view the narrative seems to imply and reiterate, what is binding is transient and not to be portrayed by any voice/speaker because there is none to be tracked.

2.2 Jennifer Egan's you *narrative and a non-reciprocal power semantics*

"Technology has afforded ordinary people a chance to glow in the cosmos of human achievement" (Egan 2012, Kindle location 374/897[7]), reads one of the approximately 140-characters isolated sentences that constitute Egan's novella *Black Box* (2012). Through a speculative fiction stance, Egan portrays an army of James-Bond-like female secret agents in a fight against powerful male criminals set in the US, in an era dominated by "new heroism" whose goal is "to merge with something larger than yourself" (Egan 2012, location 392/897). This is an entertaining but otherwise gloomy story about a misogynist world in which markedness of discourse—non-standard lexical and grammar structures—equals to textual exposure: all marked items are a tell-tale sign of the vulnerability of the focused-on character (and the text itself) as well as an intentionally ambiguous and manipulative attitude towards the actual reader. In brief, *Black Box*[8] revolves around so-called female "citizen agents," turned into cyborg-like superwomen via embodied technologies and a special training—often recalled in the narrative. Conceived as (non)human entities, these women are taught to experience their bodies as apparatuses, no longer their own, but property of the authority recruiting them and culturally identified as an

[7] The novella was read and analysed on its Kindle version. This double number indexes a precise page/location in the Kindle – see the layout of a typical page in Fig. 2.
[8] From here onwards I will refer to *Black Box* as *BB*.

American organisation otherwise unspecified. Conceived as recording human devices that serve also as repository of the information they collect, these female (non)humans are sent out on missions to find their target, the so-called "Designated Mate," and spend with them as much time as possible. The main task is to use their bodies to record/collect useful information that can be retrieved once the mission is over or, in the likely event of a fatal accident, when their body-devices will be rescued and information retrieved from within them, that is, from the black box their body hosts.

If (non)human entities allure people into activities/relationships based on an ego-rewarding mechanism, should *you* culture be read as an empowering age? Or is this *you* in fact an icon for the advent (or revival) of a disempowering era? Should we read the *you* culture as the one in which we are recruited in some twenty-first century army of sorts, whose authority is intentionally voiceless and by wearing a *you* mask shifting the addressee position according to undefined goals? What if the origins of such army-like entity are partly human and partly nonhuman, that is, the by-product of a controlling though unidentifiable organisation whose scope is a vague fight against a "Designated Mate," i.e. enemy—populism?

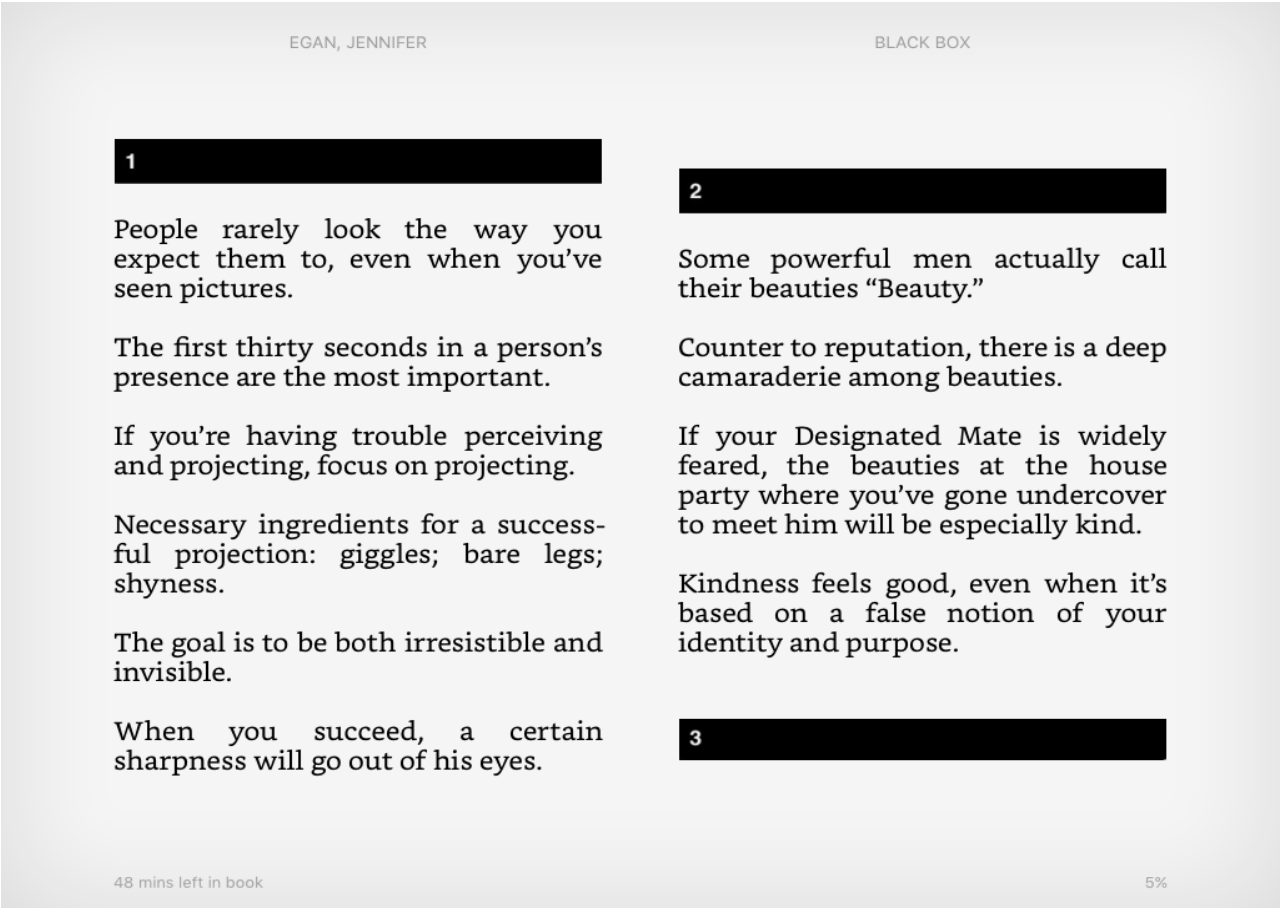

Fig. 2: *Black Box* layout in the 2012 Kindle edition

At the very beginning of the novella (see Fig. 2), which was first issued in online instalments on *The New Yorker*'s Twitter Account,[9] the pronoun *you* is used ambiguously along with the present tense (present simple/continuous and perfect) and in hypothetical clauses (*if*- and *when*-clauses). Consider a snippet of chapter 1 (just six paragraphs):

> 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 are having trouble perceiving and projecting, focus on projecting. (Egan 2012, location 44/897)

Textual *you* can thus legitimately be perceived as a generalisation and a substitute for the generic pronoun *one* both addressing a narratee and the reader and, more broadly, anyone. Morrissette highlights how the use of *you* can generalise a situation and let it be read as "almost a maxim of behaviour, guiding the reader to prepare, as it were, for an identical or similar event" (1965, 8-9). But is that so in Egan's novella? The projection created by the *if*-clauses, as opposed to reports on specific past actions, may also be classified among the stylistic techniques inviting the reader to share the experience, if only momentarily, again as an inclusive general *you*. Such a *you* could also be a call to some sort of empathic or "sentimental identification," or a medium to "moral conclusion," as Morrissette (1965) labels some examples taken from Hemingway's narratives, in which the role played by the present tense and the grammar structures is crucial in a futureless language, like English. Typical or probable actions usually tend to increase ambiguity when the *you* pronoun is used, as opposed to it being used alongside past simple or past progressive to point to single past events or habits. In Egan's fiction, though, an apparent compliance with early readings of *you* narratives is to be quickly discarded as its referential complexity gradually increases. The opening, hypothetical, *pseudo-guidebook*-style *you* is quickly replaced by a standard *you*, offering a perfect, if temporary, match between the focused-on character, a 33-year-old graduate woman, and the narratee. A form of self-address is established, "if you love someone with dark skin, white skin looks drained of something vital" (Egan 2012, location 63/897, chapter 3). However, even the standard *you* is not meant to last long and works as a short-lived semantical filling for the grammar category/narrative device. A new sudden shift occurs in chapter 5 when textual *you* turns plural while the main narratee is caught among peers, training to become a "citizen agent."

[9] In its original online instalment version, due to the medium, the textual *you* must have had a strong doubly deictic valency as both an intra- and extradiegetic referent for the Twitter community users/readers.

> At such moments, it may be useful to explicitly recall your training:
> "You will be infiltrating the lives of criminals.
> "You will be in constant danger.
> "Some of you will not survive, but those who do will be heroes.
> (Egan 2012, location 76-897, chapter 5. Inverted commas left open in the original)

The first line is an introduction while the following lines in inverted commas (nine in total) are some excerpts of the maxims that the women were exposed to and meant to learn during their training—recalled for the first time at this point in the narrative and marked as direct speech for clarity. What occurs is a further shift in the *you* narrative that does not exclude the previous ones but leads readers into the narrative ecology and in front of a new (non)human textual *you* that cannot be fully portrayed/interpreted as no clue is provided. This is in fact a plural *you* and it is addressing several would-be citizen agents to become devices aimed at taking on new specific missions. The whole narrative, as it becomes clear, is simultaneously a recording of a *written to the moment* experience that adds on to rules that the entire female army must comply with. Those are orders and, as performative speech acts, are meant to correspond to a precise action from the addressee. It should not be forgotten that the novella was firstly issued in Twitter-instalments, hence designed beyond the formality of a recount and into a pragmatic textuality happening while words were moulded, treating each tweet as a soft substance, to be shaped right in front of an original audience, namely the Twitter followers/readers. Eventually, the overlapping of the generic, the individual, the plural, the inclusive and exclusive *you*(s) determines a dehumanizing effect on the main narratee and her female mates—potentially projecting on the readers as well. Figuring out what *you* is to be detected becomes an increasingly puzzling query for two main reasons: first, it seems that various readings are legitimate at different stages and should not be discarded. Rather, each contributes to building a fitting-to-the-context *you*, expectedly mutant and in an unforeseeable way for that matter. Second, the extremely vague, sparse, and fragmented description of the female focused-on character prevents a solid grasp of her own identity: readers only learn that she is a good-looking married woman in her thirties with no children yet. However, no other feature is offered and the margin for a psychological portrait is scarce—the only insight offered is about decisions made in compliance with rules and orders within the mission. Eventually, the frequent reference shifts contribute to promoting a "doubly deictic you," working both inwards and outwards the diegetic world—and more appropriately so, probably, when the fiction was still on Twitter.

From a thematic perspective, anonymity matches the secret-agent frame, while, if considered as a rhetoric choice, namelessness reinforces the absence of a point of view and enhances a textual *you* power of address that reduces the addressee to a passive actor: a (non)human agent, just one out of many other similar ones whose common features are age—they are all thirty-something—and being not-yet mothers, deprived of volition and identified as "beauties" throughout the fiction. Not too dissimilar to avatars. Femaleness, though the only recognisably human/animal trace left, is a pre-requisite of the device each citizen agent embodies to match their "Designated Mate" for a perfect pairing, based on the attractive power a woman can exercise over a man and as a consequence reach into his more private, criminal or illegal, activities.

In the army, mainly addressed as a collective entity, each individual is a disposable device within a hierarchical chain of a seemingly (non)human community, whose communication exchange relies on a jargon—made visible and easily identifiable by the reader via capitalised compound nouns—that points towards a range of precise fictive items, such as targeted humans, technological devices, and strategic locations (for example "Designated Mate," "Dissociation Technique," "Field Instructions," "Therapeutic Agents," "Geographic Hotspot.")

An additional linguistic aspect contributing to textual *you* instability is the unreliability of those same formal grammar markers (verb tenses and moods) on which Richardson builds his taxonomy. For instance, the zero *if*-clauses do not fulfil their function, that is, reporting a truth commonly accepted or generalising over typical situations. They rather disambiguate what the focused-on character faces at a very specific moment—never as a general practice or attitude. In chapter 2, the type one *if*-clause "if your Designated Mate is widely feared, the beauties […] will be especially kind" equals in meaning an affirmative clause, that is, *the Designated Mate is widely feared therefore the beauties […] are especially kind*. The semantics is about presenting a fact within the fictional world (usually conveyed by a zero-conditional clause) rather than a speculation. This marked use of the first-conditional turns out to be the standard in this narrative, but should be better read as a disruption of the *if*-clause type and a manipulation of the modal *will*, that is here used in two of its typical other functions: to describe a habit (that of the "beauties") and to imply a directive with which the "beauties" must comply. Another marked use of a common grammar structure occurs in chapter 4 and involves modality again. A series of parallel epistemic modals, "may or may not," are juxtaposed to fragments of a conversation between the focused-on character and the "Designated Mate."

> "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.
> (Egan 2012, location 60/897, chapter 4; emphasis mine)

Having lost their epistemic value, the modals in this passage are in fact assessing the citizen agent's efficiency and response to the mission challenges and are a softer way (a form of hedging) to present expected (unpleasant or tricky) reactions by the "Designated Mate"—that is, suspicion and sarcasm. The sentence, formulated as a question, is in fact an order within the mission the woman is undertaking. Two consequences relative to this markedness are worth noting. First, the maxim-nature of the *if*-statements ceases to be an option; second, the epistemic value of *may* is marred. These sentences dominated by textual *you* guide the reader alongside the focused-on character into the action as it unfolds, offering contextualised advice and comments rather than universal lifestyle directions. Yet, this should not be taken as a simple self-address or a *doubly deictic you* because Egan's textual *you* consists of many different connected parts contributing to the portrayal of an almost self-generating (non)human identity, whose accountability is ultimately to be retrieved in the nameless authority to which all female agents obey. A further element in the narrative adds to this referential complexity, though gaining value very gradually in the novella: each citizen agent is a (non)human creature, regarded by the governing body as a disposable, if precious, device whose primary goal is "to transcend individual life, with its petty pains and loves, in favor of the dazzling collective" (Egan 2012, location 865/897, chapter 45). The citizen agent's actual body is a machine owned by the organisation in power and a valuable medium indeed: "Remember that, should you die, your Field Instructions will provide a record of your mission and lessons for those who follow" (Egan 2012, location 815/897, chapter 43). The focused-on character's main activity consists of collecting real-time data that are primarily addressed—via textual *you*—to prospective citizen agents both as single individuals and as plural entities.

Unsurprisingly, the voiceless *you* narrative mode in Egan's narrative is undermined for the first time in chapter 5 (see excerpt above), when a nameless authoritative source's direct speech breaks the textual *you* mode recalling the training and clarifying aims, strategies, and procedures of the mission but also its risks by introducing the first person plural *we*. "We ask of you an impossible combination of traits: ironclad scruples and a willingness to violate them" (Egan 2012, location 73/897, chapter 5). Since *you* in English is both singular and plural, the first-person plural pronoun *we* is expected to be called into question alongside *I* at some point or other in a second-person fiction. The unidentified *we* in *BB*, supposedly a superior in a military-like hierarchy, is adopting an exclusive first-person plural narrative voice exploiting "a

very old and ubiquitous metaphor for power" (Brown and Gilman 1960, 254). The intrusion of this *we* makes the absence of volition more explicit in the focused-on character, whose recording is clearly biased or even censored by the powerful organization that recruited these women. Whatever is uttered comes from someone acting and speaking out as imprinted via previous specific training, depicting a perspective on textual *you* that neither Richardson nor Herman consider, but which was identified by DelConte. Textual *you*s, the scholar argues, "manifest […] in narrative technique the notion that someone or something outside of yourself dictates your thoughts and actions" (2003, 205). The concept of dictation generates an additional complexity between what is voiceless and what can be voiced. It both expands on the issue of the agent's identity and on what sort of agency can legitimately be performed. Besides, it articulates who may or should be understood as the doer in a technologically enhanced age. As discussed in the introductory section, the current information age is, at best, a context in which we are all mediators of others' nudges and/or of the various social and moral conditionings; at worst, it is a context in which we are no master of whatever selves are projected onto us via social interaction or media of different sorts. Such media have turned our identities into an ever-on-call figure, constantly busy in replying to an email, texting, chatting, posting, recording a voice message, and so on and so forth. But there is one very human action that has not been encouraged and we no longer seem to be interested in, that is, living life as a live event rather than a *recorded* one. In this respect, Egan's work offers an engaging if harsh critique of this new status to which we have increasingly grown prone.

3. Twenty-first-century textual *you*: an ethical call on (non)human identity and moral responsibility

If read in the light of a human-nonhuman or human-machine immersive communication context, the discussion on twenty-first-century textual *you*, a displaced or decentred subject that implies nested, multiple, and nonhuman voices, should acknowledge its transformation and enhanced mutability, whereby identities are exposed to and merge with several nudging forms of *others*. From the perspective of the linguistic and diegetic structure, textual *you* fiction shows a strong reliance on markedness of syntax and genre features as well as a manipulation of typical lexico-grammar functions. For instance, by looking within, without, and outwards the narrative, an almost *written to the moment* fiction is generated, constantly simulating a conversation, ambiguously playing on inclusion and exclusion with the actual reader during the reading process.

The sort of nonhuman *you* culture Egan's novella and Winterson's novel portray seems to be based either on a call-on-hold, that is to say, a state of never-ending connectedness via one or other channel (including the self as channel); or on an ever-on-call attitude, as if constantly set to a reply mode, more prone to dehumanizing and enslaving than empowering, in an altogether new ecology, a living system, if a conceptual and speculative one that is already showing its capability of reproduction and evolution.

Furthermore, by exposing their read-beyond-the-line nature, by questioning the direction and agency of almost any communicative exchange, *you* narratives overwrite the humanist subjectivity encoded in personal pronouns, thus affecting the interpellative force of second-person address especially in a traumatizingly hypermediated world. This is a process somewhat comparable to that kind of positive enlightening suffering discussed by Butler, "a matter of wrestling ethically with one's own murderous impulses, impulses that seek to quell an overwhelming fear, as it is a matter of apprehending the suffering of others and taking stock of the suffering one has inflicted" (2004, 150).

By taking us through "humility, vulnerability, impressionability and dependence" (Butler 2004, 150-1), the grammar pronoun of address re-conceptualizes the representation of the term *trauma* as defined by Freud and recalled by Cathy Caruth (1996):

> In Freud's text, the term trauma is understood as a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind. But what seems to be suggested by Freud [...] is that the wound of the mind – the breach in the mind's experience of time, self, and the world—is not, like the wound of the body, a simple and healable event, but rather an event that [...] is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor. (1996, 3-4)

In the narratives here discussed, the theme is that of a hidden/hiding identity—be it undercover, disguised, secret or strongly susceptible—struggling with issues of accountability, agency, and ability to adhere to a model of compliant subjected self, thus caught in the dilemma of who is human and who is nonhuman. However, textual *you* narratives tend to show their inability to disclose the source of the threat in an almost self-feeding, reiterated phenomenon that insists on the question of subjectivity as something "ruptured, disparate, in process" (Schofield 1997, 112). Simultaneously, by reinstating "voicelessness" (Kacandes 1993, 139), that is, the absence of a source, textual *you* represents a threatening and traumatic event that rakes over the shock of being addressed, whether from an inner moral voice or any other binding source.

Daring as it may sound, a concluding lesson may be drawn: these authors seem interested in rethinking realism, in undermining dichotomies and debunking stereotypes and myths to assess the intricacies of a contemporary age which plays on ever more blurred boundaries between fictitious and factual, virtual and actual, but also human, matter, and nonhuman. Aimed at foregrounding what has lost currency and ground in our times, these *you* narratives are enacting an ethical call on (non)human identity and moral responsibility. Because ultimately, the way we portray ourselves and others is already a reply to that epic question about who or what may be called human and what nonhuman; two concepts that should not be conceived as symmetric opponents, but rather as extreme poles in a continuum, with far more gradable and nuanced variants in-between.

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