

The fing epic fate

of novelistic subjectivity in
twitter fiction

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Abstract

What does it mean to write about competing visions of identity on a social media site, at the convergence of public and private selves—and, of course, the occasional cat meme? This project will examine notions of self in three Twitter fictions: “Black Box” by Jennifer Egan; *Small Fates* by Teju Cole, with particular emphasis on his “Seven short stories about drones,” and *The F***king Epic Twitter Quest of @MayorEmanuel* by Dan Sinker. As I will argue, Twitter fiction emerges as a way to renegotiate social relations in a changed, technologized world and dramatizes the dangers of being an embodied subject in an age of information exchange. Undoubtedly, some will view Twitter fiction as a threat to more traditional forms of literature. However, I will argue just the opposite: that Twitter fiction strengthens a traditional view of the novel by reasserting notions of individualism, privacy, and interiority in a more public, interconnected world. Ultimately, I will suggest that the novelistic subjectivity *does* survive in Twitter fiction, just in a form remarkably adapted form not bound to a single self. In Twitter fiction, there is a public self and a private self, a present self and a past self that continues to haunt.

In Chapter One, I will argue that Jennifer Egan's “Black Box” views itself as an active agent and attempts to produce a certain kind of reader, a particular type of subjectivity. Of the three, “Black Box” most closely resembles the domestic novel, and like Armstrong, Egan suggests that literary subjectivity is productive; it creates a certain kind of reader and therefore a certain kind of person. However, in direct contrast to Armstrong's novelistic subjectivity, Egan gives us a female subjectivity whose very interiority threatens the story's dystopian world of supervision and information control. For Egan, novelistic subjectivity becomes a way to rebel against troubling, technologically enforced collectivism. Reading is the means to achieve a self that is deeply interior but also engaged with the public realm.

Chapter Two will focus on Teju Cole's *Small Fates* project, with particular emphasis on his “Seven short stories about drones.” Cole's tweets, as I will argue, suggest that wider historical forces create a certain kind of subjectivity which literature reproduces. In this case, the wider military and social technologies reduce novelistic subjectivity to microfictional subjectivity. However, unlike Watt and Lukács, Cole suggests that causality can work both ways, that literature can recuperate the moral use of these technologies and the subjectivities they obliterate. As Cole suggests, a world where technology blurs the real and simulated, increasing both physical and emotional distances between subjects, no longer allows for the novelistic subjectivity and the empathy it instills. If Egan's critique of social and military technologies is much more vague, Cole is incredibly specific in critiquing both drones and social media. Skeptical of whether traditional novelistic reading is a valid means of resistance, Cole tries to re-tool the literary as political mechanism.

Finally, Chapter Three will focus on Dan Sinker's *@MayorEmanuel*, which most fully exploits the Twitter form. Whereas the Cole and Egan Twitter fictions express nostalgia for the novelistic subjectivity, *@MayorEmanuel* criticizes novelistic subjectivity as a deathly, political construction. What Sinker proposes is an ultra-novelistic subjectivity in its place. Unlike Cole and Egan, Sinker does not critique social media so much as embrace it as a democratizing platform, something further reflected by the audiences to which each piece speaks. In Cole's literary references and Egan's choice to publish her story on *The New Yorker's* Twitter stream, the pieces address themselves to highly literary, elite audiences. Although *@MayorEmanuel* does contain some highbrow references, it also has enough pop culture and swearing to embrace a

much wider audience. And yet, of the three, @MayorEmanuel expresses the most skepticism about literary agency. As I will argue, @MayorEmanuel proposes that literary subjectivities, although they may seem like productive agents with a life of their own, must ultimately bow to the real events that enable them.

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