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DIGITAL PLATFORMS

J. D. Schnepf

Promptly at 8 pm Eastern Time on the evening of May 23, 2012, the *New Yorker* Fiction Department Twitter account (@NYerFiction) tweeted out the first lines of Jennifer Egan's short story, "Black Box." Leaping into action for an hour each night over the following ten nights, the account dispensed the story of a female national security agent in judiciously portioned, tweet-sized installments with the unwavering regularity of an automaton. Though the story would appear in print in the magazine's "Science Fiction Issue" the following week, the Pulitzer-Prize winning author of *A Visit From the Good Squad* (2010) claimed she wrote "Black Box" with the social media platform in mind: "This is not a new idea, of course, but it's a rich one—because of the intimacy of reaching people through their phones, and because of the odd poetry that can happen in a hundred and forty characters" (*New Yorker*).¹ Citing Egan as an example, literary scholar Aarthi Vadde has observed that "celebrated authors and esteemed arbiters of the literary have turned social media platforms into venues for formal experimentation" although the success of such experiments remains open to debate (39).

For professional and amateur authors alike, Twitter has established itself as a significant venue for the production and distribution of born-digital literature. Like other Web 2.0 platforms, Twitter facilitates online exchange and sharing of user-generated content. Founded in 2006, it has become one of the world's most trafficked social media platforms with active monthly users numbering in the hundreds of millions. Scholars of digital literature refer to stories published on the platform as "Twitterature" (Murray) or "Twitterfiction" (Thomas), while amateur Twitter authors often label their stories with hashtags including #twifi, #twifc, #twifiction, #twitlit, and #twitterstory to make them easy to find.² What makes for a popular story on the platform can be hard to predict. The viral success that author A'Ziah "Zola" King experienced with the publication of 2015's epic #TheStory, for example, stemmed in part from her responsiveness to readers; she found herself "riffing on the reactions of her followers who were responding in real time" (Kushner). In contrast, "Black Box" did not court reader engagement or use hashtags. It did not interact with other accounts or time its posts to correspond to the pace of the plot's unfolding action. And despite Egan's claim that the platform prompted literary experimentation, critics questioned whether the story took up Twitter's affordances in any meaningful way. "The general consensus post-publication centered around a missed opportunity to engage Twitter's real-time

network of connections,” one writer observed of the story’s reception, “leaving critics to wonder, why tell this story through Twitter at all?” (Gutman 274).

While “Black Box” didn’t take advantage of the usual array of features that shape the end-user’s experience with the platform’s graphic interface, it did draw on Twitter’s rarely acknowledged networked connections to the US security state. Egan’s story about a volunteer counterterrorism agent responds to how the post-9/11 US national security state’s geopolitical interests merged with the volunteerism of feminized networked users. This merger is both thematized in the plot and experienced through the activity of reading Twitter literature on one’s very own digital device. If it was difficult for some critics to see how “Black Box” maximized its particular medium, the story’s significance to the study of platform literature lies in how it mediates the conjuncture of digital activities and national security operations at the level of narrative; ultimately, this conjuncture constitutes the contemporary condition of reading any work of digitally networked literature on a corporate platform.

Twitter’s relationship to US national security might not be immediately apparent. To track this relation, this chapter revisits the political climate in the US in the wake of 9/11, when the Patriot Act expanded and reinvigorated the alliance between the federal security state and its telecommunications firms. As Mimi Thi Nguyen puts it, the Act’s “sweeping measures of surveillance and incarceration target the racial stranger, the possible terrorist” perceived to be Muslim, North African, or Middle Eastern as part of a white nationalist fantasy of detection and detainment (134). At the same time, the Act established that this retrenchment of US imperial power would adhere to the technoliberal logic of “war as big data” (113), Tung-Hu Hui’s evocative phrase for the figuration of national security conducted through an instantaneous and all-encompassing program of data surveillance. Social media platforms remain among those telecom companies that maintain robust partnerships with government agencies, optimizing surveillance of the public’s electronic correspondence.

As a byproduct of this partnership, platform users are swept into the digital security fold, their online activity abstracted into securitized effects. Digital activity that is “[s]imultaneously voluntarily given and unwaged, enjoyed and exploited” (74) is what Tiziana Teranova has termed “free labour” (73). Scholars including Brooke Erin Duffy, Kylie Jarrett, and Lisa Nakamura have pursued the concept’s intractably gendered dimensions: insofar as online activity is frequently affective, immaterial, and unremunerated, they argue, it is often feminized much like reproductive labor. For example, platforms regularly profit from the unpaid antiracist, feminist pedagogical labor that women of color and sexual minorities perform in digitally networked spaces to create safer online communities (Nakamura). However, feminized digital volunteerism does not necessarily work toward antiracist or feminist ends. For instance, Inderpal Grewal has written about Michelle Malkin and her fellow “warbloggers”—women whose online labor is consumed with concern for national security and homeland defense (126). This brand of “security mom” volunteerism works on behalf of white heteronormative femininity to shore up the settler colonial and imperial interests of the US security state. For Grewal, this gendered formation of the volunteer feminized security figure is born out of the US-led war on terror and twenty-first-century neoliberalism’s enshrinement of privatization and human capital. Positioning the protagonist of “Black Box” as a surrogate for the online reader, Egan’s story dwells on the role of the securitized, feminized digital media user who emerges here as the target of labor exploitation and data capture. These gendered considerations are significant given that, as Mark McGurl has asserted, the gendering of literary life continues apace in the digital age and that “literary reading as a whole is still significantly skewed toward women, as it has been for centuries” (18).

More broadly, “Black Box” prompts us to question how the geopolitical interests of the US security state, mediated through social media, ought to inform the way we study digitally networked literature that is hosted on and distributed across corporate platforms. From Amazon to Wattpad, leading scholars of contemporary digital literature foreground how a few internet companies have come to wield remarkable influence over contemporary literary life, structuring the conditions of online literary production and distribution.³ Highlighting the capitalist imperatives that drive the culling of data to create user profiles, target online consumers, and generate advertising revenue (Brown), these studies pinpoint some of the literary and sociological forms that corporate platforms instantiate. For instance, McGurl observes that Amazon’s Kindle Direct Publishing program has hastened the reconceptualization of all fiction as genre fiction while Sarah Brouillette notes that the self-publishing platform Wattpad invites “online sociality” while “mak[ing] its real money by using readership data to find out what content is the most popular and then optioning it for TV and film production.” Without diminishing the significance of platform capitalism’s impact on literature, we can draw on research in critical digital studies that identifies how domestic security agencies rely on user data to suggest that the militaristic and securitized political conditions shaping platform literature’s production, dissemination, and reception should play a larger role in our study of it.⁴ In what follows, this chapter first offers a brief history of Twitter as a geopolitical player in matters of US national security after 9/11. It then considers the implications of this arrangement for our understanding of platform literature by turning to Egan’s story and drawing out how digital surveillance has become an everyday practice of counterinsurgency for Americans who read literature on corporate platforms. Finally, foregrounding the feminized user-reader, it considers what happens when the fantasy of data’s immateriality confronts the embodied experience of reading online.

Twitter and Platform National Security

When one reads literature on a social media platform, the traditional literary role of the reader intersects with the Web 2.0 category of the social media user. This means that one’s literary pleasures will be quantified—reduced, in other words, to the platform’s corporate imperative to maximize the extraction of user data. Information about this reader-user (their age and location, say) or their readerly tendencies (the time of day they read, the number of tweets clicked in a serialized story, and the pace at which this happens) gets swept up in the culling of data and used for a variety of purposes. As scholars of digital and social media Daniel Trottier and Christian Fuchs explain, major platform infrastructures provide the conditions for the commercial surveillance of user data to co-exist with security and intelligence surveillance:

Social media is predominantly a corporate-state-power phenomenon, a force field in itself, in which powerful corporate and state interest are present and meet, as evidenced by the existence of a surveillance-industrial complex (PRISM) that controls social media communication and is constituted by a collaboration of social media and Internet companies, secret service and private security companies (such as Booz Allen Hamilton, for which Edward Snowden worked before his revelations).

(34)

While the US government has a long history of collecting electronic information in partnership with US-based telecommunications corporations, such collaborations were reframed

explicitly as counterterrorist measures in the days that followed September 11, 2001, when George W. Bush signed the Patriot Act into law. Among other things, the Act, which sought “to deter and punish terrorist acts in the United States and around the world, to enhance law enforcement investigatory tools, and for other purposes,” included a series of provisions that gave legal justification for enhanced surveillance procedures (United States). In the years that followed, news of these government measures and the nature of private–public data-sharing arrangements would occasionally make national headlines. In 2005, for example, *The New York Times* reported that the National Security Agency (NSA) had conducted large-scale surveillance on internet communications and had obtained access to domestic and international communications, thanks to an alliance with telecommunications companies including AT&T (“NSA Timeline”). To protect the NSA’s relationship with private companies the Bush Administration introduced a series of amendments that strengthened government surveillance programs by ensuring that those telecom companies providing user data were shielded from lawsuits, while continuing to erode privacy protections for internet users.⁵

However, for millions of Americans, the extent of these arrangements between internet companies and the state came into full view with Edward Snowden’s disclosure of the NSA’s PRISM program in June of 2013. Snowden—then a contractor working at the NSA—released classified government information revealing the existence of PRISM, a mass surveillance program targeting Americans’ international communications via email, telephone calls, and social media. The program, initiated by the Bush Administration in 2007 under the supervision of the US Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Court (FISC), allows the NSA to request private user data from a broad collection of US-based tech firms without requiring search warrants. For the ACLU and other organizations that seek to defend civil liberties, the program plainly constituted a violation of the Fourth Amendment. PowerPoint slides among the leaked documents listed several prominent tech companies and platforms purportedly working in conjunction with PRISM, including Microsoft, Yahoo!, Google, Facebook, PalTalk, YouTube, Skype, AOL, and Apple (one ACLU National Security Project attorney stated in 2018 that the list “very likely includes an even broader set of companies” [Toomey]).

Twitter was notably missing from the list of PRISM-compliant internet companies. At the time, journalists speculated that the company’s absence was likely due to two factors: first, unlike email, most forms of communication on Twitter are already publicly available for collection. Second, Twitter had a record of challenging what it characterized as “invalid government requests” from federal authorities compelling the company to divulge user information (Martin). Though such legal challenges would seem to suggest that Twitter maintains an adversarial relationship with the federal government when it comes to sharing user data, the platform has a robust history of working with the government to secure national interests in cases ranging from state-affiliated election manipulation to coordinated disinformation campaigns. In fact, as recently as 2018 the company has cited the evolving “geopolitical terrain worldwide” to justify its “partnering with civil society, government, our industry peers, and researchers” to root out what it termed “bad-faith actors” on the platform (Gadde and Roth).

Twitter also acknowledges that it complies with some of the requests it receives from federal national security organizations. This cooperation is an example of what legal scholar Elena Chachko calls the “platform–government nexus”—the “part-symbiotic, part-adversarial emerging platform–government relationship around core national security and geopolitical matters” (61). Twitter informs its users that while it “generally requires a search warrant to disclose any contents of communications” (“Twitter Transparency Report”), it also acknowledges that it occasionally suspends its commitment to Fourth Amendment

protections: “Twitter may disclose content in the U.S. without receiving a search warrant in rare circumstances, in accordance with applicable law,” the company states on its website (“Twitter Transparency Report”). These “rare circumstances” include “certain national security requests” in the form of National Security Letters (NSLs) as well as other orders that fall under the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act (“Twitter Transparency Report”). The ACLU has described NSLs as a “provision of the Patriot Act [that] radically expanded the FBI’s authority to demand personal customer records from Internet Service Providers [and other companies] without prior court approval” (“National Security Letters”). Moreover, the full extent of Twitter’s cooperation with the US government’s counterterrorism mandate remains unclear in part because the platform is legally barred from disclosing the details of these arrangements. In 2014, the service provider announced that it was “prohibited from reporting on the actual scope of the surveillance of Twitter users by the U.S. government” (“Taking the Fight”).⁶ The company filed a federal lawsuit to remove government prohibitions; as of the writing of this chapter, however, Twitter is restricted from publishing national security request information the US government deems classified (“Twitter Transparency Report”).⁷

Twitter also preemptively privatized many national security measures through self-imposed internal regulations. These measures included “proactive enforcement against terrorism and violent extremism, which requires independent monitoring and intelligence” (Chachko 83). To this end, the social media platform has built up its infrastructural capacity for surveillance by expanding the number of employees dedicated to issues of national security and acquiring new technologies that aid in the detection of “terrorist and violent extremist content online” (Chachko; “Addressing”). The platform’s delivery of privatized national security also draws on its hundreds of millions of users whom it recruits to work toward this political objective. To encourage what it calls “User Reporting of Terrorist and Violent Extremist Content,” the company even invites “users to report or flag inappropriate content, including terrorist and violent extremist content” that will in turn “allow the company to prioritize and act promptly upon notification of [such material]” (“Addressing”). In this way, Twitter proactively solicits its platform users to work as voluntary agents of the security state.

“Black Box” and Reading as Digital Counterterrorism

For the casual social media user, the breadth of Twitter’s national security work in support of US empire is not front of mind. In fact, we ought to note the ease with which a powerful corporation’s solicitation of users to perform volunteer counterinsurgency work slips from our awareness as we scroll, retweet, and read. How does our understanding of Twitter fiction—and the digital user who reads it—change when we center the platform’s long-standing arrangements with US national security interests?

Consider the case of “Black Box”—a work of post-9/11 Twitter fiction that prompts such a consideration given its own thematic interest in counterterrorism work that is digitized, feminized, and voluntary. “Black Box” is the futuristic tale of an unnamed woman spy sent to the Mediterranean on behalf of the US government to infiltrate a criminal network and steal digital data. While much has been written about the short story, in what follows I draw out two aspects of the narrative that are relevant given its status as platform literature.⁸ First, “Black Box”’s protagonist is a feminized digital laborer who assumes voluntary counterinsurgency work on behalf of the US surveillance state. Second, the protagonist is under constant surveillance by US security agents herself. Egan’s decision to place the protagonist

in the dual position of both an agent and target of state surveillance presents a complex and conflicted depiction of what is entailed in being a networked feminized user and reader of online fiction.

In interviews, Egan has disclosed that longtime readers will likely recognize the unnamed protagonist of “Black Box” as Lulu, a character from her novel *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2010) (““This is all artificial””). In the final chapter of that novel, Lulu is at work in a music industry in the throes of a seismic transformation. “[P]aperless, deskless, commuteless, and theoretically omnipresent” (317), Lulu stands in for a new kind of worker. Endlessly adaptable and perpetually networked, Lulu’s easy traffic in information blips and instant contact aligns with the neoliberal fantasy of market efficiency. This context is important to “Black Box” since Lulu’s stint as an agent of counterterrorism effectively constitutes a form of unpaid gig work undertaken by American women who the story refers to as “beauties” (85).⁹ As the story announces early on: “You will each perform this service only once, after which you will return to your lives” (85). From the start then we understand that success at state spy craft depends on a digital dexterity that Lulu—and any consumer with a smartphone—already possesses. In the sci-fi world of “Black Box,” the digital worker’s ability to meld with her technology is made literal: the assortment of digital apps she deploys—a microphone in her right ear canal, a data storage chip under her hairline, a record button in her fingertips, a camera in her left eye, and a “Universal Port” between her toes—are discreetly embedded in her body.¹⁰

Lulu’s ostensibly private digital competence gets pressed into unpaid public service on behalf of the US security state. Here, it’s useful to recall Inderpal Grewal’s account of various feminist and feminized volunteerisms that emerge out of the twenty-first century’s imperial wars. These include the “security mom” who “appears as conservative, white, and patriotic supporter of state security and the heterosexual, white family” (120) and the “security feminist” who “appears as a liberal, white, and patriotic feminist working for the state and military” (120). If Egan’s 33-year-old protagonist is plucked from her almost parodically “normal” and normative life as a wife and information worker to be dropped into the high-stakes world of espionage, then this convergence of the basic mother-to-be and the militarized worker is reflected in the seemingly incongruous nature of many of the tweets. As a feminized family woman Lulu is reminded to focus on “giggles; bare legs; shyness” (85) and her conviction that this “service had to be undertaken before you had children” (87). As a security feminist, meanwhile, she recounts that her perilous work “will help thwart an attack in which thousands of American lives would have been lost” (96) and perhaps even “change the course of history” (85). We have seen how invisibly Twitter enables such an amalgamation for all of its users who perform this unpaid security work while leisurely scrolling their social media feeds. In such cases, the leisure activity of reading platform literature doubles as the counterinsurgent activity of monitoring tweets for “terrorist and violent extremist content” on behalf of the US security state (“Addressing”).

It’s significant too that, as a subject of the security state, Lulu is monitored herself: “Your whereabouts will never be a mystery; you will be visible at all times as a dot of light on the screens of those watching over you,” the story affirms (89). Through an allusion to the satellite infrastructures of global positioning systems (GPS) that track Lulu as she performs her mission, the tweet speaks to the Twitter reader whose geographic positions might well be tracked digitally in the very process of reading. For, aside from users who voluntarily provide profile locations or geotag tweets, Twitter also constantly collects “the approximate location of the IP address you used to access Twitter” (“How to”). It’s significant too that the mis- sive beginning with GPS ends with the slippage from “watching you” and “watching over

you”—a phrase that evokes the feminization of biopolitics in its merging of mass surveillance performed by national security agencies with privatized forms of care labor.

For Lulu, state surveillance is ultimately continuous with heteronormativity: “Imagining yourself as a dot of light on a screen is oddly reassuring,” she notes. “Because your husband is a visionary in the realm of national security, he occasionally has access to that screen” (91). In this formulation, the violation of government surveillance is enveloped in the familiarity of the heteronormative couple so much so that the security subject is grateful to US agencies for tracking her. Lulu is a security subject who willingly offers herself up to the state for inspection, a phenomenon Rachel Hall has described as “feminine heterosexual acquiescence to the new surveillance technologies” (137). But Lulu’s acquiescence to the demand for transparency is nowhere more apparent than in the “Field Instructions”—officially “a record of your mission and lessons for those who follow” (97) and harvested directly from her head by a futuristic technology capable of capturing a woman’s interior monologue at the press of a hidden button.

Reembodying the Networked Reader

Whether Virginia Woolf’s eponymous protagonist in *Mrs. Dalloway* or Molly Bloom in James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, modernist fiction offers familiar portrayals of a woman’s interiority, in which a woman’s singular thoughts, private feelings, worries and pleasures find form in language attributed to internal monologue. This is not so with “Black Box,” where the protagonist’s networked status undermines even the possibility of private thought. As Egan affirms in an interview: “[...] with Lulu in ‘Black Box’ her thoughts are not even her own: they are, in some sense, owned by the state, the record of her work for them, and equally valuable whether she is alive or dead” (“This is all artificial” 12). These circumstances do away with the possibility that a woman’s thoughts might be impervious to the acquisitive, extractive world of the surveillance-industrial complex in which they take shape. If Lulu must constantly “filter [her] observations and experience through the lens of their didactic value” (88), then the narrative’s relentless second-person imperative mood abets the transformation of personal thought into useful instruction by addressing an implied “you.” Indeed, if the imperative mood conveys the security feminist’s pertinent guidance to civilian agents performing US counterterrorism operations, it also accords with “quasi-therapeutic discourses” assumed by the self-improving neoliberal subject and the familiar online idiom of self-help aimed at improving feminine conduct (Gill 156). The imperative’s capacity to voice the discourses of military directive and social media’s self-help culture makes it an apt mode of address to the vigilant feminized digital media user. Only once in the story does the imperative give way to the subjunctive mood: “For clearest results, mentally speak the thought, as if talking to yourself” (88). Here, the “as if” locates the possibility of “talking to yourself” in the realm of the desired but unattainable condition of being alone while under surveillance.

As “Black Box” intimates, Twitter fiction is inextricably bound up with the geopolitical alignments of the platform on which we encounter it. If Nakamura’s digital laborers work toward an antiracist, antisexist networked future, then Egan’s beauties present a circumscribed political vision of the feminized digital user-reader: isolated and denied a collective consciousness that might allow them to transform their conditions, they put their digital dexterity to work on behalf of heteronormative reproductive futurity and US imperialism. While “Black Box” will point out the subtle terror associated with the constraints that come with this form of exploited networked existence, the story nonetheless offers an unsettling

allegory for the Twitter user who reads the story online. Egan makes this connection clear given that she imagines her Twitter story “reaching people through their phones” (*New Yorker*) while the story pinpoints “the handset” (94) as the key device for accessing one’s digital data. In circulating the story on Twitter’s social media platform, Egan tells a tale of securitized digital subjects to readers who become securitized digital subjects in the very act of reading. If we take “Black Box”’s tweets as the content of Lulu’s “Field Instructions,” the reader may well be “you”—that is, the civilian agent for whom the instructions are intended. Of course, for those who use Twitter regularly, the online activity of securitized digital readers working on behalf of US security interests looks utterly familiar and mundane. But channeled through the hyperbolic tropes of the science fiction spy thriller, the geopolitical ramifications of a social media user’s everyday relation to the US security state are made starkly visible. In this way, Egan’s turn to genre fiction clarifies the immense amount of volunteer online labor required to sustain the US security state’s digital operations. In Egan’s hands, those invisible acts of dutiful vigilance and transparency that securitized feminist and feminine subjects are asked to participate in every time they read platform literature move out from behind the computer screen. Reembodying the digital security worker through the citizen agent Lulu, Egan highlights her work as a form of active and physical participation in the political projects of US empire.

Reembodying the digital worker has other consequences too. What Hu has identified as the logic of “war as big data” depends on data harvesting—that is, the posthuman fantasy that abstract data is neatly separable from the material form of the human. And yet, as “Black Box” makes clear, this pernicious fantasy of “bodiless information” that N. Katherine Hayles once deftly described in *How We Became Posthuman* continues to rely on the hierarchal impositions of gendered embodiment to operate (1). The fact that Lulu is encouraged to dissociate from her body as it is repeatedly attacked and violated in the story only underscores the demand that women’s embodiment must be erased to maintain the state and corporate fiction that digitized personal data circulates with seamless efficiency. The story’s title is of course an oblique reference to the protagonist who, through her service, is reduced to little more than a vessel for the user data that has become so valuable to the US national security project. “[Y]our body will yield a crucial trove of information,” she assures herself (97). But the title is also a reference to the networked reader who, in the course of reading “Black Box” on Twitter’s platform, will “yield a crucial trove of information” herself.

Notes

- 1 In November 2017, Twitter changed its character limit from 140 characters to 280 characters.
- 2 See Project TwitLit’s “TwitLit Data: Graphs.” Since 2016, the most used hashtag to designate this literary form has been “twitterature.”
- 3 See, for example, Brouillette’s “Social Media Memoir and Platform Capitalism,” McGurl’s *Everything and Less: The Novel and the Age of Amazon*, and Vadde’s “Amateur Creativity: Amateur Creativity: Contemporary Literature and the Digital Publishing Scene.”
- 4 See, for example, Guzik’s “Discrimination by Design: Predictive Data Mining as Security Practice in the United States’ ‘War on Terrorism’”; Hu’s *A Prehistory of the Cloud*; and Trottier and Fuchs, “Theorising Social Media, Politics and the State.”
- 5 These amendments include Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act (FISA) of 2008—an amendment to the FISA of 1978. Among other things the amendment removed warrant requirements in certain cases and introduced a new Title that gave the government the authority to conduct surveillance on the electronic communications of non-US persons located abroad as well as US persons abroad with FISA Court notification. While individuals located within the United States could not be designated as an official target by government surveillance, they could be inadvertently surveilled in cases of incidental collection.

- 6 What the company does share are the number of National Security Letters (“NSLs”) received which are no longer subject to non-disclosure orders (“NDOs”) (“Twitter Transparency Report 19”). The number of NSLs Twitter has received that are still subject to indefinite NDOs is unknown.
- 7 See the “Twitter Transparency Report 19” and “Twitter Inc. v. William P. Barr, Attorney General of the United States, et al.,” for further details regarding the lawsuit.
- 8 For scholarship on Egan’s “Black Box” see, for example, Gutman’s “Cyborg Storytelling: Virtual Embodiment in Jennifer Egan’s ‘Black Box’”; Newman’s “Your Body Is Our Black Box: Narrating Nations in Second-Person Fiction by Edna O’Brien and Jennifer Egan”; and Santini’s “The Short Form Reshaped: Email, Blog, SMS, and the MSN in Twenty-First Century E-Pistolary Novels.”
- 9 For reference purposes, direct quotes from “Black Box” cite page numbers from the story’s print version.
- 10 For more on the shifting relationships between bodies and technology, see Jennifer Rhee’s chapter “Humans and Posthumans” in this volume.

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