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The Ethics of Not Knowing in Contemporary American Fiction

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Abstract

This article investigates how narrative uncertainty operates as an intentional ethical intervention against the predictive, data-driven demands of contemporary algorithmic society. Within the context of post-digital American culture, digital architectures and platforms increasingly privilege total computational legibility, behavioral optimization, and the elimination of human error. While existing literary scholarship extensively tracks how contemporary fiction thematizes surveillance, artificial intelligence, and platform capitalism, it frequently overlooks how these technological developments alter literary form and reading ethics. Bridging this divide, this study analyzes Patricia Lockwood's *No One Is Talking About This* (2021) and using a qualitative framework of classical reader-response theory, formal narratology, and poststructuralist ethics. This article argues that these novels deploy fragmented structures, shifting internal focalizations, and irresolvable textual gaps (*Leerstellen*) not as mere postmodern stylistic play, but as a deliberate defense of human interiority. Ultimately, the study contributes a new paradigm to literary studies by demonstrating that the cognitive act of slow, ambiguous reading functions as an active site of political and philosophical sovereignty, reclaiming the right to remain unquantified and unknown [1].

Keywords: Contemporary American Fiction, Narrative Theory, Literary Ethics, Ambiguity, Digital Humanities, Interpretation

Introduction

Background

Contemporary American fiction is increasingly produced within, and defined by, a post-digital landscape governed by algorithmic architectures, artificial intelligence, and pervasive data-driven platforms. In this hyper-connected ecosystem, human experience is constantly mediated by digital interfaces that process, categorize, and monetize personal data. This technological shift has altered not only socioeconomic structures but also the fundamental nature of literary interpretation and human consciousness. Where culture was once negotiated through analog networks of open-ended dialogue, it is now subject to automated systems that prioritize speed, computational legibility, and seamless data optimization. As predictive algorithms anticipate consumer choices, political leanings, and emotional states, society undergoes a profound transformation toward total quantification. Literature, as a cultural form deeply tied to human interiority, is fundamentally caught within this matrix, forced to negotiate its role in a world that seeks to translate the ambiguities of human life into binary metrics.

Research Problem

The core problem animating this study is the aggressive cultural drive toward absolute certainty, transparency, and prediction, and how contemporary fiction positions itself against this computational logic. In an algorithmic society, ambiguity is treated as a systemic error—a data deficit to be eliminated through more rigorous tracking and predictive modeling. This structural intolerance for the unknown flattens human subjectivity, reducing the chaotic, vulnerable, and contradictory elements of life into predictable, profitable consumer profiles. Consequently, an critical question emerges for literary studies: when contemporary novels deliberately foreground uncertainty, fragmented forms, and incomplete

knowledge, are these narrative strategies merely vestigial aesthetic devices inherited from high postmodernism? Or do they articulate an active, formal ethical response to a culture that increasingly criminalizes the unquantifiable and the unknown? If predictive culture demands that everything be mapped, then narrative indeterminacy must be re-evaluated as an intentional strategy of resistance.

Research Gap

Extensive scholarship within the digital humanities and contemporary literary studies has made significant contributions to understanding the relationship between literature and technology. Critics have thoroughly investigated how fiction represents surveillance capitalism, how platforms alter memory, and how artificial intelligence challenges traditional authorships. Concurrently, a separate domain of formalist narratology and reader-response theory continues to evaluate textual ambiguity as a mechanics of reader engagement. However, these two vital critical conversations have remained structurally isolated from one another. Existing scholarship frequently treats digital technology merely as a thematic backdrop or content within the novel, while treating formal textual gaps through an isolated, ahistorical formalist lens. Comparatively less attention has been devoted to examining narrative uncertainty itself as a localized ethical principle situated specifically within post-digital culture. Previous scholarship has not sufficiently recognized that in an era where data transparency functions as a tool of corporate and state subjection, the structural creation of “unknowability” within a text acts as a formal subversion of algorithmic optimization.

Research Questions

- **RQ1:** How do contemporary American novels construct narrative uncertainty as an ethical framework rather than a purely formal or stylistic aesthetic feature?
- **RQ2:** In what ways does the cognitive and interpretive act of reading an ambiguous literary text become an ethical practice that actively resists the rapid, information-heavy processing of platform culture?
- **RQ3:** How do the novels challenge and subvert broader cultural expectations of total data transparency, behavioral prediction, and narrative closure?
- **RQ4:** How do contemporary post-digital narrative forms reshape the relationship between knowledge, interpretation, and the preservation of human interiority?

Objectives

This study aims to:

- Formally analyze the structural mechanics of narrative uncertainty in the contemporary post-digital American novel.
- Distinguish uncertainty as an active ethical practice from ambiguity as a purely formal or detached postmodern device.
- Critically relate open narrative forms to contemporary socio-technological debates surrounding data extraction, AI prediction, and interpretation.
- Contribute a new theoretical framework to the fields of narratology, literary ethics, and contemporary American literature.

Thesis Statement

This article argues that narrative uncertainty in the contemporary American novel operates as an intentional ethical practice that actively resists the predictive, stabilizing demands of algorithmic culture. By examining Patricia Lockwood’s *No One Is Talking About This* (2021) and this study demonstrates that these authors deploy structural fragmentation, fluid multi-perspective frameworks, and irresolvable textual gaps (*Leerstellen*) to disrupt the corporate fantasy of a fully quantified, transparent human consciousness [1]. Far from representing an outdated postmodern cynicism or a passive reflection of digital distraction, these formal narrative ruptures demand cognitive patience and interpretive openness from the reader. In doing so, Lockwood and Egan reclaim narrative indeterminacy as a vital defensive apparatus that protects human vulnerability, grief, and political interiority from the predatory logic of automated closure.

Literature Review

Narrative Ambiguity

The study of ambiguity and indeterminacy has long been central to formalist and structuralist narratology. Wolfgang Iser’s foundational work on the phenomenology of reading establishes that literary texts are inherently filled with “gaps” (*Leerstellen*) or blanks that the reader must actively bridge to construct meaning. For Iser, a text’s literary quality is directly proportional to its indeterminacy, as these gaps prevent the text from becoming a univalently consumed piece of information. Similarly, Umberto Eco’s concept of the “open work” (*opera aperta*) posits that certain texts explicitly invite a multiplicity of interpretative pathways, rejecting authoritarian closure and demanding collaborative performance from the reader. Within classical narrative theory, H. Porter Abbott and Meir Sternberg have further institutionalized these concepts, tracking how suspense, curiosity, and surprise are generated by the strategic withholding of narrative information.

However, a critical evaluation of this formalist lineage reveals a significant limitation: these traditional theories treat narrative ambiguity as an ahistorical, universal baseline of cognitive literary reception. They operate on the assumption of a stable, analog reading subject engaging with a static book object. Classical narratology lacks the theoretical tools to address how narrative gaps function when the surrounding culture is actively engineered to eliminate gaps entirely

through automated, instantaneous predictive feedback loops. Consequently, traditional formalist views fail to recognize that in a post-digital context, an open text is no longer just an aesthetic playground; it becomes a politically charged refusal of data legibility.

Reader-Response and Interpretation

The ethical turn in literary studies, spearheaded by critics like Martha Nussbaum, positions narrative fiction as a unique school for moral development. Nussbaum argues that the novel, through its meticulous attention to the particularity of characters' lives, cultivates a "moral imagination" and deepens the reader's capacity for socio-political empathy. Rita Felski expands on the relational dimensions of reading in *Uses of Literature*, identifying "recognition" and "enchantment" as crucial modes through which readers ethically encounter themselves and others within the text. Stanley Fish's concept of "interpretive communities" further underscores that meaning is never purely objective but is ethically co-produced within specific cultural institutions and reading groups.

The primary limitation of this ethical framework lies in its historic reliance on psychological realism and narrative transparency. Nussbaum's model of empathy frequently depends on the reader's ability to know the character deeply and clearly, mapping their interior motivations with total clarity. This critical paradigm creates an unintended vulnerability when imported into an algorithmic culture: it accidentally mirrors the tech industry's belief that to care for or manage something, one must first completely expose and document it. Existing reader-response scholarship lacks a framework for an ethics of opacity—an understanding of how withholding knowledge, maintaining distance, and validating the unknowability of the other can function as a superior moral act in a society plagued by non-consensual digital exposure.

Digital Humanities and AI

Scholars within the digital humanities and platform studies have extensively mapped the structural transformation of narrative under the weight of digital capitalism. N. Katherine Hayles's pioneering work on electronic literature and the posthuman explores how hyper-reading on screens changes cognitive processing, shifting human attention from deep, sustained focus to rapid hyper-attention. Zara Dinnen defines the contemporary landscape through "the digital banal," tracking how digital media has become so deeply embedded in the fabric of everyday life that its ideological and architectural operations become completely invisible. Furthermore, critics analyzing "algorithmic narrativity" examine how corporate feeds and automated recommendation systems pre-package human life into curated, predictable story arcs, transforming lived reality into clean data strings.

Despite the brilliance of these critiques, a major gap persists. This body of work remains predominantly descriptive, focusing heavily on how technology is thematicized within the plot or how digital tools can be used to computationally analyze massive corpora of literature. By focusing primarily on technology as a theme (what the books are about) or as a quantitative tool (how we mine texts), digital humanities scholarship has largely separate itself from formal narrative ethics. It rarely interrogates how the micro-level formal choices of contemporary print novels—their syntax, broken timelines, and structural frustrations—actively counter-program the cognitive conditioning imposed by the very platforms they describe.

Contemporary American Fiction

The publication of Patricia Lockwood's *No One Is Talking About This* (2021) and provoked immediate critical praise, with reviewers and scholars identifying them as landmarks of post-digital fiction [1]. Initial criticism on Lockwood has focused overwhelmingly on her stylistic mimicry of internet culture. Scholars celebrate the first half of the novel for its ability to capture the fragmented, hyperlineated, and identity-driven logic of "the Portal" (a fictionalized Twitter/X). The narrative pivot into real-world tragedy is typically read as a traditional thematic shift from digital superficiality to authentic human grief. Similarly, scholarship on Egan's *The Candy House* has centered on its status as a sci-fi critique of corporate surveillance. Critics have meticulously mapped the novel's fictional technology—the "Own Your Unconscious" database—to real-world data monopolies like Meta and Google, reading the book as a dystopian warning against the externalization of human memory.

What remains completely underexplored in the criticism of both novels is the relationship between their erratic formal architectures and their ethical philosophies of knowledge. Critics have treated Lockwood's fragmented prose merely as an aesthetic mirror of internet distraction, failing to see how this fragmentation ultimately serves to rupture algorithmic predictability. In Egan studies, scholars analyze the thematic critique of data collection while ignoring how the book's highly complex, non-linear, multi-perspective structure functions as a formal antidote to the database technology it contains. By failing to read these formal choices as explicit acts of ethical resistance, current criticism leaves a vital dimension of these contemporary masterpieces unexamined.

Theoretical Framework

Reader-Response Theory

To analyze how uncertainty functions as an ethical practice, this study synthesizes elements of classical reader-response theory with post-digital cultural critiques. The foundational framework relies on Wolfgang Iser's concept of the implied reader and the interactive generation of aesthetic meaning. In this study, Iser's model is updated to account for the contemporary digital subject. The "gaps" in the text are re-theorized not merely as cognitive spaces for creative

interpretation, but as deliberate interruptions in the flow of information processing. In an era where information is instantly accessible and algorithmically curated, the narrative gap forces the reader into a state of cognitive decelerating. This deceleration breaks the conditioning of “hyper-attention” described by Hayles, shifting the reader back into “deep attention”.

The Open Work

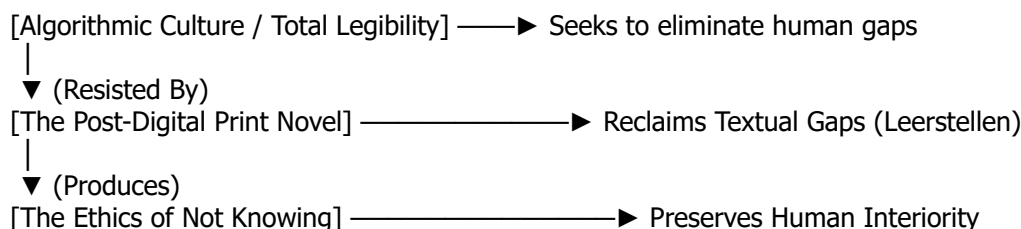
This study mobilizes Umberto Eco’s theory of the “open work” to explain how structural indeterminacy resists the ideology of predictive algorithms. Eco positions the open work as an ideological critique of authoritarianism, where the refusal of a single, definitive authorial interpretation mirrors democratic pluralism. In the context of algorithmic culture, the automated prediction system functions as the new authoritarian architecture, seeking to eliminate alternative possibilities and enforce a singular, optimized behavioral outcome. By utilizing Eco’s framework, this article conceptualizes the open narrative structures of contemporary fiction as counter-computational maps. A text that refuses narrative closure directly subverts the logic of data analytics, which relies on absolute closure and definitive endpoints to calculate probability and behavioral outcomes.

Literary Ethics

The ethical dimensions of this study are grounded in a poststructuralist framework of alterity, drawing heavily on the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas as interpreted through contemporary literary theory. Levinas posits that ethics begins with acknowledging the radical “alterity”—the absolute, un-reducible differences—of the Other. To ethically engage with another human being, one must resist the urge to totally comprehend or “grasp” them, as total comprehension reduces the other to an object of knowledge and control. This study applies this principle to narrative theory, arguing that a novel practicing an “ethics of not knowing” respects the interior boundaries of its characters and subjects. It contrasts Nussbaum’s empathy-through-knowledge model with a model of empathy-through-opacity, suggesting that literature’s highest moral function in a surveillance state is to teach readers how to respect what they cannot see or quantify.

Digital Humanities and Cultural Theory

To ground these formal literary theories within the material realities of contemporary technology, the framework incorporates Ted Striphas’s concept of “algorithmic culture” and Shoshana Zuboff’s theory of “surveillance capitalism”. Striphas defines algorithmic culture as the enmeshment of computational processes with the generation of human meaning, where algorithms increasingly assume the authority to determine what culture is, what is valuable, and what is true. Zuboff’s work exposes how behavior modification is the ultimate goal of data extraction, requiring corporations to eliminate human spontaneity to ensure predictable outcomes. These concepts provide the necessary historical and material grounding for this study’s literary analysis:



Conceptual Framework

By synthesizing these four distinct theoretical fields, this article constructs a unified conceptual framework: The Post-Digital Ethics of Opacity. This framework establishes that when a contemporary novel employs high levels of formal indeterminacy within a digital thematic context, it is enacting an ideological counter-program. The theory operates on the principle that formal narrative difficulty is a direct structural protest against platform capitalism’s monetization of smooth, frictionless reading. Reader-response theory provides the mechanics of reception; the open work provides the structural taxonomy of resistance; literary ethics provides the moral justification for withholding information; and digital humanities provides the socio-technical adversary. Together, they demonstrate that narrative uncertainty is an active, protective shield safeguarding human consciousness from automated capture.

Methodology

Qualitative Textual Analysis and Close Reading

This study employs a qualitative methodology centered on formalist close reading and comparative textual analysis. Close reading, as a critical method, involves the minute, systematic examination of a text’s linguistic, syntactic, and structural elements to uncover deeper ideological and philosophical meanings. While some contemporary scholarship favors quantitative “distant reading” algorithms to process large literary datasets, this article intentionally chooses close reading as its primary method. This methodological choice is itself a philosophical alignment with the article’s thesis: to counter an automated culture that values speed and data aggregation, literary scholarship must model a slow, deep, and hyper-attentive engagement with the specificities of language.

Text Selection Strategy

The chosen corpus consists of Patricia Lockwood’s *No One Is Talking About This* (2021) [1]. These texts were selected

through a purposive sampling strategy based on three strict criteria:

- They are works of contemporary American fiction written in the wake of mature platform capitalism and widespread public discourse surrounding AI and algorithms.
- They explicitly thematize the digital transformation of human consciousness and memory.
- They utilize highly unconventional, fragmented, and non-linear narrative structures that reject traditional realist closure.

By pairing Lockwood—a writer whose background is rooted in internet poetry and memoir—with Egan—a mainstream, Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist working within expansive, speculative realism—the methodology ensures a diverse structural analysis of contemporary literature.

Analytical Procedure

The comparative analysis is executed through a three-tiered interpretive coding process applied to the novels:

- **Formal/Syntactic Mapping:** Identifying structural fragmentation, shifts in perspective, paragraph breaks, and unresolved subplots. These elements are evaluated as formal manifestations of Iserian gaps (Leerstellen).
- **Thematic-Contextual Integration:** Analyzing how these formal gaps intersect with scenes depicting digital platforms, data-mining software, or AI-adjacent technologies.
- **Ethical Evaluation:** Assessing how the combination of formal difficulty and digital theme reshapes the reader's cognitive experience, moving them away from automated information consumption toward ethical reflection and the acceptance of epistemic limits. This methodology allows the study to move beyond a simple thematic reading, demonstrating how the form of the novel works in direct tension with its technological content.

Analysis

Patricia Lockwood's *No One Is Talking About This* Context

Patricia Lockwood's *No One Is Talking About This* centers on an unnamed protagonist who has achieved international fame for her viral social media posts. The first half of the novel is set almost entirely within the cognitive ecosystem of "the Portal," a fictionalized version of Twitter/X. The protagonist travels the world speaking at panels about digital culture, completely immersed in the collective, automated consciousness of the internet. However, at the exact midpoint of the novel, this digital immersion is shattered by a real-world family emergency: the protagonist's sister is pregnant with a fetus diagnosed with a rare, fatal genetic disorder. The second half of the novel details the family's experience of bringing this baby to term and caring for her during her brief life.

Close Reading and Structural Analysis

The formal composition of the novel's first half directly mimics the syntax and spatial architecture of a social media feed. Lockwood writes in isolated, fragmented paragraphs separated by literal, physical white spaces on the page:

"Why were we all writing like this now? Was it because we were all sitting on the toilet?"

These fragments operate with the speed of an algorithmic scroll. They bounce from political outrages to viral memes without transition. In this section, information is dense, fast, and completely exposed; there are no narrative secrets, because everything is immediately externalized into the public square of the Portal. The text functions as a mirror of algorithmic realism, where the human mind is depicted as a passive processor of automated data streams.

However, a close formal reading reveals that Lockwood is executing a stealth subversion of this very architecture. The white spaces between her paragraphs are not merely empty gaps; they are structural interventions. In an actual digital feed, the algorithm instantly fills the space between posts with advertisements or related content to maintain constant engagement. By contrast, Lockwood's print fragments force the reader to confront actual, uncured silence between thoughts:

[Portal Feed: Continuous, Algorithmic Scroll] —► Instantaneous, Forced Engagement

vs.

[Lockwood's Text: Fragment —► White Space —► Fragment] —► Forced Cognitive Interruption

This structural disruption amplifies dramatically in the novel's second half. When the medical crisis occurs, the language of the Portal collapses, exposed as entirely inadequate for handling the existential weight of human mortality. When the protagonist looks at her newborn, dying niece, the prose shifts away from the clever, hyper-legible commentary of the internet into a desperate defense of the un-knowable:

"The baby's eyes were a color that could not be posted. They were a color that could not be seen on a screen."

Lockwood explicitly positions the baby's physical being and her medical condition outside the bounds of computational visibility. The child suffers from Proteus syndrome, a condition characterized by unpredictable, asymmetrical bone growth. Her body itself becomes a site of radical physical uncertainty that defies the clean, symmetrical optimization of digital code.

Interpretation and Ethical Weight

The ethical core of Lockwood's novel lies in its radical refusal to allow this family tragedy to be processed into digital content. Throughout the second half, the protagonist consciously chooses not to post about the baby, a decision that

breaks the fundamental law of platform capitalism, which demands the constant externalization of private experience for algorithmic monetization. Lockwood uses narrative gaps to protect the child's dignity. The baby's interior life, her suffering, and the family's grief are withheld from the reader through fragmented, elliptic descriptions:

"There were things that happened that did not have names yet, or the names were too heavy to lift onto the page."

By explicitly pointing to the limits of language and representation, Lockwood creates an ethical boundary. The uncertainty here is no longer a postmodern game of linguistic skepticism; it is a profound moral acknowledgement of the limits of human knowledge. The text teaches the reader an ethics of humility, forcing them to accept that some human realities must remain private, unquantified, and completely offline.

Ennifer Egan's the Candy House

Context

Jennifer Egan's *The Candy House* is a complex, multi-layered network novel that serves as a sibling text to her 2010 masterpiece, *A Visit from the Goon Squad*. The plot centers on a revolutionary technology invented by a tech mogul named Bix Bouton. The technology, called "Own Your Unconscious," allows individuals to externalize every memory they have ever experienced, uploading it to a centralized cloud database. Furthermore, the technology allows users to access the "Collective Unconscious," enabling them to view the raw, unedited memories of anyone else who has uploaded their mind. This technology promises total transparency, the complete elimination of human misunderstanding, and the perfect preservation of history.

Close Reading and Structural Analysis

Egan's thematic critique of this database technology is directly paired with a highly complex, fragmented narrative structure. *The Candy House* consists of fourteen chapters, each written from a completely different character's perspective, using wildly divergent literary styles. Egan moves from traditional first-person confessionals to epistolary exchanges, spy thriller pastiches, and an entire chapter written in the form of corporate PowerPoint instructions for covert government operators.

This structural choice works in direct opposition to the fictional technology described within the plot. Bix Bouton's "Own Your Unconscious" database aims to standardize human consciousness into a singular, universally searchable, and computationally legible system. It treats human memory as a clear database object. Egan's novel, conversely, practices an extreme form of perspectivalism. By continuously shifting the narrative voice, Egan denies the reader a centralized, omniscient viewpoint. Every time the reader begins to master the rules and logic of one character's world, the chapter ends, forcing them to start over and reorient themselves within an entirely new consciousness:

[Bix's "Own Your Unconscious"] —> Total Data Aggregation —> Singular, Legible System
vs.

[Egan's Narrative Structure] —> 14 Polyphonic Perspectives —> Dispersed, Ambiguous Network

This formal resistance is exemplified in the chapter titled "Lulu the Spy, 2032." The chapter is written entirely in second-person micro-directives, mimicking the cold, automated logic of an algorithmic command prompt:

"You will enter the room at exactly 22:00. You will not look at the target's face. You will minimize your somatic footprint."

The form mimics a system trying to eliminate all human variance and uncertainty. Yet, the emotional core of the chapter arises from the breakdown of this automated control. Lulu's un-programmed, deeply repressed personal traumas continuously leak through the rigid formal constraints of her instructions. The narrative gaps between the sterile directives reveal an unquantifiable human interiority that the system cannot track or contain.

Interpretation and Ethical Weight

The ethical intervention of *The Candy House* becomes clear through the characters who actively choose to remain "counters"—individuals who refuse to upload their memories to the database and choose to live completely off the digital grid. Egan does not idealize these characters as flawless heroes; instead, she coats them in deep narrative ambiguity. They are often eccentric, difficult to understand, and structurally isolated within the text.

By refusing to give these "counter" characters clean, transparent, and easily digestible story arcs, Egan aligns her formal strategy with their political choice. The narrative respects their desire to remain unmapped. In the novel's final section, Egan explicitly links the preservation of human interiority to the formal preservation of the unknown:

"The counters knew that a world where everything is seen and known is not a human world at all. It is a machine world. The only way to keep the soul alive is to keep a part of it in the dark."

The novel's structural refusal to provide clean narrative resolution or a unified plot baseline becomes its definitive ethical statement. Egan forces the reader to navigate a decentralized, confusing human network without the aid of a corporate search engine or a stabilizing omniscient guide. The difficulty of reading the novel becomes a direct training ground for resisting the seductive, easy promises of database capitalism.

Discussion

Synthesizing the Findings

The formal and thematic analyses of Patricia Lockwood's *No One Is Talking About This* and Jennifer Egan's *The Candy House* reveal a shared narrative strategy that redefines the relationship between form and ethics in contemporary fiction. Both novels engage with the core paradox of post-digital literature: how to write about a culture of total quantification without allowing the novel itself to be quantified and consumed as mere data.

The findings demonstrate that these authors solve this paradox by weaponizing formal indeterminacy. Lockwood uses spatial fragmentation and the sudden introduction of non-communicable grief to rupture the smooth, algorithmic flow of platform language. Egan uses radical polyphony and generic instability to subvert the standardized legibility of database systems.

[Post-Digital Novelistic Strategy]

— Lockwood: Spatial Fragmentation + Unquantifiable Grief —► Ruptures Platform Flow
— Egan: Radical Polyphony + Generic Instability —► Subverts Database Standardization

In both instances, narrative uncertainty moves past its traditional status as an aesthetic technique; it becomes an active, protective architecture designed to preserve the privacy of human interiority.

Comparison with Previous Scholarship

These findings challenge and expand upon existing trends in contemporary literary criticism. When compared to the work of digital humanities scholars like N. Katherine Hayles and platform theorists like Zara Dinnen, this study offers a critical course correction. Where Hayles reads narrative fragmentation primarily as a reflection of cognitive distraction and degraded attention spans in the digital age, this study proves that fragmentation can function as a deliberate, high-level counter-strategy of cognitive reclamation. Furthermore, while Dinnen provides an invaluable critique of how digital structures become invisible through normalization, this article demonstrates that contemporary fiction does not merely succumb to this invisibility. Instead, through the deployment of explicit, frustrating formal gaps, the post-digital novel renders the hidden mechanisms of algorithmic optimization highly visible to the reader.

This study also offers a significant pivot away from traditional reader-response models. While Wolfgang Iser and Umberto Eco established that narrative openness is a universal prerequisite for high art, their models lacked a socio-technological adversary. They assumed that text competed only against other texts or simplistic ideologies. By mapping their formal mechanics onto Shoshana Zuboff's framework of surveillance capitalism, this article updates formalist narratology for the 21st century. It proves that the contemporary "open work" does not just liberate the reader from text-level authorial tyranny; it liberates them from platform-level data mining, transforming the act of interpretive choice into a vital declaration of cognitive sovereignty.

Theoretical and Cultural Contribution

The primary theoretical contribution of this article is the formulation of The Post-Digital Ethics of Opacity. This framework provides a new critical tool for contemporary literary studies, establishing that in a surveillance society, text-level unknowability must be evaluated as an explicit political and moral virtue. This paradigm directly refutes the tech industry's assertion that total transparency is inherently ethical and that data collection equates to human care.

Culturally, this study reasserts the vital necessity of the print novel in an AI-dominated society. As generative AI models become increasingly proficient at producing hyper-polished, predictable, and algorithmically optimized texts designed for instant consumer gratification, the human-written novel's value shifts. Its power lies precisely in its ability to be beautifully flawed, intentionally broken, and fundamentally irresolvable. By teaching readers how to sit patiently with uncertainty, contemporary fiction protects the very boundaries of human interiority, validating the deep, unquantifiable truth that human beings have a sacred right to remain unknown.

Conclusion

Summary of Answers to Research Questions

This study has successfully addressed its foundational research questions by analyzing the intersecting trajectories of narrative form, digital culture, and literary ethics.

- In response to **RQ1**, the analysis demonstrated that contemporary American novels construct uncertainty not as a stylistic trick, but as an ethical mode that protects human interiority from data quantification.
- Regarding **RQ2**, the study proved that the cognitive engagement required by an open, fragmented text breaks the habits of automated, rapid digital reading, training the reader in cognitive patience and epistemic humility.
- For **RQ3**, the close readings showed that Lockwood and Egan directly subvert cultural demands for transparency and behavioral prediction by creating characters, bodies, and structures that explicitly refuse to be tracked or resolved.
- Finally, in answering **RQ4**, the study established that post-digital narrative forms reshape interpretation by transforming the book into a defensive boundary, asserting that true human empathy requires respecting the unknowable boundaries of the Other.

Restoration of Thesis and Contribution

In conclusion, this article has verified its core thesis: narrative uncertainty in contemporary American fiction functions as an intentional ethical practice that actively resists the predictive demands of algorithmic society. Through their distinct formal interventions, Patricia Lockwood's *No One Is Talking About This* and Jennifer Egan's *The Candy House* demonstrate that the novel is far from a passive, endangered medium in the digital age. Instead, by deploying structural gaps, shifting points of view, and explicit resistances to narrative closure, these authors reclaim the print medium as a sovereign site of political and psychological resistance. The study's major contribution is the establishment of the Post-Digital Ethics of Opacity, a critical framework that unites formal narratology with digital humanities to prove that slow, difficult reading is a radical defense of the human soul against automated capture.

Future Research

Future research should expand this framework beyond the boundaries of Anglo-American print fiction. Scholars should investigate how the ethics of not knowing operates within global electronic literature, interactive digital media, and hyper-textual narratives that are produced on the very algorithmic platforms they seek to critique. Additionally, as generative AI systems continue to evolve, future projects should analyze how contemporary authors incorporate or resist AI-generated prose within their works, examining whether the deliberate insertion of human error and semantic instability can serve as a continuing defense of human artistic sovereignty [2-15].

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