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### The Black Box: Close Reading Literary Life

Scott Jarvie

**Abstract:** This paper reimagines a quintessential literary practice: close reading. The autoethnographic inquiry examines the relationship between a single text and my experience with it as teacher, student, reader and writer: Jennifer Egan’s short story “Black Box”. In doing so I make a case for the literary as a useful mode for being and teaching in classrooms, and for the literariness of the lives caught up in those classrooms. I examine various properties of the text, including the story’s unusual form, the implications of its content and genre, the narrative voice, and the central metaphor of a black box. Reading through these, I consider how the story came to shape my imagination and practice as an English teacher. A final section considers the limitations of such a formalist approach to close reading, exploring how a novel framing of close reading as relational work makes ethical readings (Gallop, 2000) possible. The paper concludes with an analysis of the implications of that approach to reading and advances resonance as a concept of value for English teachers and researchers interested in thinking about the relationship among teachers, students, and texts.

**Keywords:** close reading, ethics of reading, literariness, relational pedagogy, teacher identity



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*Who are we, who is each one of us, if not a combinatoria of experiences, information, books read, things imagined?*

Italo Calvino, *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*

I come to this inquiry asking Calvino's question of English teachers, wondering about their relationships to texts and those relationships' implications for teaching practice. While it is commonplace for English teachers to speak of a single book or handful of texts that "changed their life" (disclosure: I am one of these people), and there is certainly much nostalgia at work in the selection of texts for secondary English courses today (Jarvie et al., 2020; why else do we relentlessly assign *The Catcher in the Rye?*), I am not so much interested in the one of two favorite texts a teacher includes in their course each year. Rather I hope to take a longer view of the roles texts play in teachers' lives beyond those texts' explicit incorporation in curriculum and instruction. I turn to my own experience as teacher, student, reader, and writer with one story, performing a close reading in order to open broader understandings of the ways stories contour and distort experience, shape teacher identity, and inform teaching practice: how a particular text comes to inhere within a *literary life*.

Close reading may not be the most obvious way to do this. In its broadest sense, the term refers to the slow and careful examination of the aesthetic properties of a text (looking *closely* at what is there), but to many students and teachers, close reading evokes the dull trauma of formalist analysis devoid of subjectivity and context – of life – long institutionalized in university literature departments, secondary English

classrooms, and standardized assessments. The widespread popularity of close reading as a method of literary study can be chalked up to either its democratic potential for making literature accessible (anyone can learn to do it; your boarding school experience with Emerson or *The Iliad* doesn't matter) or its alignment with a conservative agenda to treat texts apolitically and preserve the centrality of the Western Canon – and with it the unbearable whiteness of being in English classrooms. Regardless of your take, close reading of this kind privileges the text at the expense of the person. And it's the person who is exactly my focus here. The work, then, is to tell the story of a different kind of close reading, one in which an individual life unfolds within a literary encounter. Imagined differently, such close reading

**“The work, then, is to tell the story of a different kind of close reading, one in which an individual life unfolds within a literary encounter.”**

allows English teachers and scholars to understand the practice as a relational one, one we might yet repair (Sedgwick, 2003) in envisioning more literary and ethical (Gallop, 2000) English teaching practice.

This paper builds on Kirkland's (2013) notion of *literacy lives*, or:

the unearthing of a human story that fits inside the corpus of history and the core of the human self - a story that writes itself into our words then, beneath the surface of forms and in the shades of human practice [. . . , in] literacy lives, fashioned through interaction between mind and society, across space and time, in such a way that culture, gender, social class, and social struggle interact only to resolve in meaningful content and lucid clarity, demarcating very subtle distinctions between identities, languages, cultures, and communities. (p. 10)

Kirkland’s work takes up “literacy lives” as a lens through which to examine the literate practices of young Black men, the richness of those practices and the ways they come to be un(der)valued in ELA classrooms. Cremin et al. (2012), similarly, centered “literacy lives” in their study of youth literacy practices, finding that “considerable time, space and sustained support is needed in order for teachers to examine their habits and assumptions, [and] investigate children’s everyday literacy practices” (p. 112). Meyer (1996) chose to bring the concept to an inquiry of teachers “themselves as curious and literate beings” (p. xi). Building on Meyer’s consideration of practicing and preservice teachers, Jarvie et al. (2020) studied the literacy lives of preservice secondary English teachers. Each of these studies operates from the assumption that the frame of literacy lives “provides a rich and relevant context for understanding the evolutions of texts in their lives – how such texts connect to and extend from their everyday experiences” (Kirkland, 2013, p. 4).

This inquiry diverges from those prior studies in two ways. First, I slightly but significantly shift the theoretical lens from *literacy* to *literary lives*. This change in terminology signals a switch that foregrounds the work in the aesthetic genres and lexicon, of what has been the stuff of subject area English specifically (“literature”). It accounts for the ways in which I am interested in not only literate experience broadly but literary experience specifically: how an English teacher’s life intersects with the literature she teaches. Second, unlike each of those studies, I consider literary lives through an *autoethnographic* (Butler-Kisber, 2010; Ellis & Bochner, 1996) inquiry into English teaching experience. I choose the method here because of how, as both a form of narrative inquiry and self study, it lends itself to a literary focus on my life. Like Burke

(2011) “I understand this research (and really any research at all) to be a practice in elaborated/elaborate fiction” (p. 47). The hope, then, is that through my close reading here “the words begin to write a (teaching) life. . . The words lead. Lead to other places in ways that open up possibilities for living and teaching” (Rasberry, 2001, p. 165). Autoethnography provides a literary mode for investigating the abundant depth of a single life and its intersection with literature.

In what follows I inquire into various literary effects of a single text in my life. I begin with a close reading of the story’s unusual form (it was originally serialized on the New Yorker’s Twitter account), the implications of its content and genre (sci-fi/spy fiction), the narrative voice, and the central metaphor of a black box. Reading through these, I consider how the story came to shape my imagination and practice as an English teacher, the inquiry revealing itself as a kind of “black box” investigation into a teacher’s life and work. A final section considers the limitations of a formalist approach to close reading, exploring how a novel framing of close reading as relational work makes ethical readings and pedagogies possible. The paper concludes with an analysis of the implications of that approach to relational close reading – how it animates literariness as part of a teacher’s literary life – as well as advances resonance as a concept of value for English teachers and researchers interested in thinking about the relationship among teachers, students, and texts.

**You will not be able to wait, but you will have to wait.<sup>1</sup>**

At 5:09 PM ET on May 24th, 2012, *The New Yorker’s* fiction Twitter account posted a cryptic tweet, devoid of context (Figure 1):

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<sup>1</sup> I use quotes from “Black Box” (Egan, 2012) as headings to organize this paper, in keeping with the practice of found poetry which proved crucial to my experience with the text. Structuring

the inquiry with these lines further shifts my approach away from the rhetorical/scientific and toward the literary/poetic, a crucial part of my methodological approach.

**Figure 1**

Initial “Black Box” tweet.



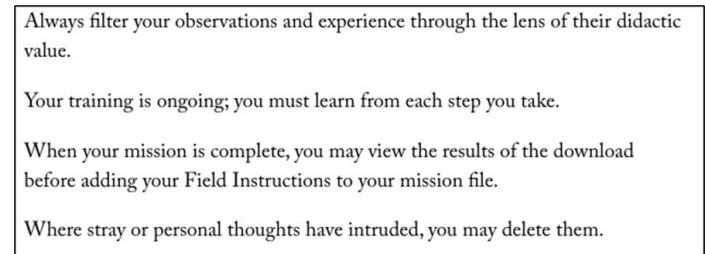
At the rate of one 140-character-or-less sentence per minute, over the course of an hour each night for the next nine consecutive days, the account continued, gradually unfurling a sci-fi espionage tale by acclaimed author Jennifer Egan. The resulting short story, “Black Box”, would subsequently be printed in the June 4th issue of the magazine.

That summer I was in the midst of my formative experience as a teacher. I had just finished an exhausting first year at a Catholic school in Brownsville, TX, where I taught junior American Lit and Creative Writing. Graduating with an English degree I turned to teaching as a way to continue to do what I loved—work with literature—but I found that surprisingly difficult. During the five-week crash course of my alternative certification program, teaching wasn’t framed for me as a literary or intellectual matter but rather primarily one of application, delivery, and measurement. It didn’t matter what I loved about the subject or what I thought the purposes of English were; what mattered was that I taught effectively, which meant backwards planning and performance assessments and above-all watertight classroom management. I did not enjoy this, for myself or my students. I struggled as a result.

So, I returned to continue teacher prep courses in the summer after that first year, dispirited, confused and not a little cynical about the work of teaching. I didn’t have a Twitter account in 2012 and I didn’t subscribe to *The New Yorker*, but Egan’s story nevertheless found me, by random in a course activity. My English methods professor<sup>2</sup> that summer asked us students to create found poems<sup>3</sup> which made some sense of our first years teaching. He passed out magazines for us to cut and tear, the June 4th *New Yorker* among them. I remember flipping pages until I saw the story’s distinctive form, koan-like sentences well-suited to the task of collaging a poem (Figure 2). I snipped.

**Figure 2**

*Excerpt of “Black Box” as presented in the June 4th 2012 New Yorker issue. Note the visual effects of translation from tweet to page: each statement cloistered with abundant space left between, a form Gee (2012) describes as “an evocative and aphoristic prose poem” marked by “haiku-esque pithiness...the sort of thing that cries out for high-quality print publication” (para. 4).*



I proceeded to work for half an hour or so, clipping and pasting and Frankensteining my way into saying something interesting, if murky, about how I felt about teaching and reading and writing and my life in that first year. I remember reading the resulting poem aloud at the end of the period and the exhilarating feeling of it, how I felt the way language could be combined mysteriously in ways I hadn’t anticipated, helping me say what I couldn’t before or

<sup>2</sup> He was, as it turned out, an exception to the rule of the place.

<sup>3</sup> The literary equivalent of collage, in which words are appropriated from (“found” within) source material and manipulated into some new poetic combination.

otherwise, something I didn't fully know the meaning of. I'd had that feeling before, in undergraduate courses on postmodern fiction and translated poetry; in a memorable survey of contemporary film; or in my private experiences as a childhood reader; or, say, with the Italian novelist's work noted above; with movies; and much of the music I loved. The literariness of texts. How their poetry became not only apparent to me but deeply moving with unsayable promise, that which drew me to the work of English and teaching in the first place, and which, I'll argue, provides a different kind of justification for keeping the work going.

I finished that methods course and moved on to a second year of teaching, not thinking much of Egan at all really. I wouldn't read her bestselling novel *A Visit to the Goon Squad* (2011) for another year.<sup>4</sup> And I didn't read the full text of "Black Box" until well into doctoral work. I turn to the story now not primarily to claim that the text is pivotal to my own formation as a teacher but rather to consider closely the role it played, how it stuck and why I would continue to think about and write with it today. In what follows I perform a close reading of the story that elucidates the role the text played in my life, and thus a role a text might play in any teacher's life: that we might more closely consider the complicated ways this interplay works.

### A rich, deep crawl space of possibilities

Close reading starts with a careful attendance to textual form. The unusual structure of Egan's story—rich and ready statements, separated out to facilitate tweeting—provided accessible material for crafting

the found poem. I had taken poetry courses and made such poems before, but I hadn't thought to make that part of the work of teaching. My encounter with Egan's story got me excited to take the activity back with me to my own secondary English classroom in the Rio Grande Valley, but the experience turned out to matter not just as a compelling one-off lesson: instead the practice of found poetry became representative, I think, of my teaching philosophy then and now, in which I ask students to aesthetically recombine and repurpose textual materials—broadly understood as multimodal, and also including memories, experiences, and aspirations—to fashion new texts, identities, and worlds for themselves. In

**"I ask students to aesthetically recombine and repurpose textual materials. . . and also including memories, experiences, and aspirations. . ."**

other words, Egan's story helped me see the ways the cuts we make within and across texts and experience and even knowledge (Foucault, 1984) provide opportunities for new (re)makings of sense and self. Often, I've found in my teaching that this repurposed found material comes from the teachers themselves, *their* texts, which students in turn encounter and

make something of their own (Jarvie, 2019). In that sense, this self-making through and with encounters with (textualized) others is relational work, the work of building educational relations, and like Bingham & Sidorkin (2004) the more I've thought about teaching the more I've wondered: "Why do schools remain if not for meeting?" (p. 5). Found poetry constitutes one representative example of this broader relational philosophy in practice.

The particular form of "Black Box", necessitated by the story's initial publication on Twitter and subsequent translation to the printed page, and encountered within the context of the activity in an

<sup>4</sup> Though I did end up teaching the twelfth chapter in my high school course, a whole narrative brilliantly constructed out of

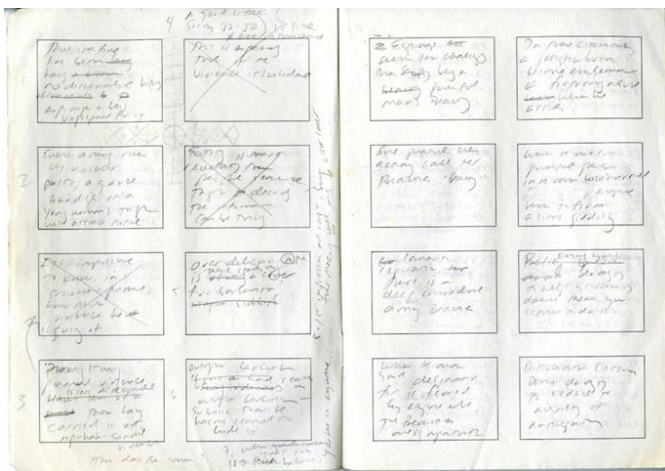
PowerPoint slides. I've never seen anything like it, before or since.



English methods course, afforded me one possibility to understand a textual pedagogical encounter as a relational one, in which I could generate something new for myself and, eventually, my students. In a subsequent interview (Triesman, 2012), Egan revealed her creative process, which involved writing out each statement within one of eight boxes per page, by hand (Figure 3). It should be no surprise then that in making my poem I found each statement – originally isolated within a literal black box – able to stand on its own, and so easily translatable as a poetic building block for my own work.

**Figure 3**

*Egan’s draft of “Black Box” (Kirtley, 2012, courtesy of The New Yorker).*



The formal representation of “Black Box” on the page aided my engagement in this way; I think this is true even moreso of the story’s tweeted form – in which individual statements are presented with the option of “favoriting” or “re-tweeting” (re-posting on one’s account) or replying. That is, the formal qualities of a tweet facilitate a reader’s focused interaction with the particular statement, while actively hiding from view the tweet in its greater context: the work as a whole. Of further note is that Egan’s decision to write in boxes came about through a friend – a particular relationship intervening to differently shape the

resulting text. Speaking of the story’s origin, Egan (Triesman, 2012) explains:

I write fiction by hand generally, and I actually wrote this by hand. Although when I started trying to do it, it didn’t feel right to be writing these long lines. I noticed that a friend had a notebook that had eight rectangular boxes on each page, and she said that she would try to find one for me. (para. 2)

A closer look at the story’s form, then, reveals the ways the text’s literary properties depended, from the start, on a relational encounter, just as its formal elements are clearly implicated in relationship with my experience with the story and how it came to matter in my life.

**The goal is to dig beneath your shiny persona.**

Turning my reading towards the content of Egan’s story reveals its relationship to my early experience as a teacher. The plot of “Black Box” follows an unnamed American spy (after publication, Egan revealed the character’s name is “Lulu” [Triesman, 2012, para. 5]) as she carries out her mission on the coast of a futuristic Southern France, sometime in the twenty-thirties (para. 6). Egan’s protagonist ingratiates herself with organized criminals, navigates violent sexual encounters, seduces leadership, vies with various mistresses and eventually steals valuable intel, leading to a thrilling escape by speedboat across the Mediterranean. The story ends with helicopters arriving to the rescue, our spy mortally wounded, her survival left up in the air. In between we learn of Lulu’s great love for the husband she left behind; the social difficulties of her interracial marriage; frustration with her movie star father, with whom she has no relationship; and the various cybernetic enhancements which aid her mission.

None of which sounds much like my teaching (or life) then or now, but I can still squint and see relevance.

The idea of teaching as a secret mission appeals in the current neoliberal moment, in which standardization, testing, accountability, etc. work to diminish the teacher’s intellectual and curricular influence in the classroom. It takes a kind of spy to be one’s own teacher behind the closed-door, presenting one way to government officials vis-à-vis test scores and policy mandates – the day’s objective aligned to CCSS standards printed clearly on the whiteboard or at the top of the lesson plan, for administrators to see – while carrying out a secretive divergent agenda. Moreover, the notion of ‘mission’ is everywhere in education these days (rooted in Christianity; see Burke & Segall, 2011), driven particularly by the kind of corporate reform culture (with its ‘mission statements’) in which I emerged as a teacher. Resonating with the rhetoric of my training is Hartwick’s (2009) assertion that “for many, teaching is a way they fulfill a sense of divinely inspired mission for their life” (p. 16). Like Lulu, my mission as a teacher was to accomplish “something larger than myself”, a selfless sacrifice that approximates the “highest form of patriotism”. Writing of Egan’s story, Precup (2016) notes similarly the way this world “transforms ordinary citizens into heroes...any citizen can serve his or her country in whatever way necessary; they just have to make their bodies available and be willing to sacrifice them(selves) for the benefit of the collective” (p. 179). And so I did: as part of an alternative certification program, I was myself parachuted into a school on the Texas-Mexico border, largely left to fend for myself until the helicopters arrived in May.

Clearly, though, “Black Box” is not a story about a school teacher. But select any sentence (tweet) from Egan’s story at random—which I’ve argued above the form invites us to do—and it’s not hard to imagine

how the work might resonate with a young educator. Pause, then. Step back from the context of this argument. Try, like Lulu does, to perform your “Dissociation Technique”, and forget that “Black Box” is a story about a beautiful spy in the dystopian near-future. Hear instead: the idealism of beginning teachers, girding themselves with self-help slogans:

*You are an ordinary person undertaking an extraordinary task.*

*In uneasy times, draw on the resilience you carry inside you.*

Or echoes of high-minded teacher educators, deploying graduates out into the country:

**“A few of you will save lives and even change the course of history. Human beings are superman.”**

*A few of you will save lives and even change the course of history.*

*Human beings are superhuman.*

A beginning teacher again, frustrated with their faith in an inadequate teacher preparation program:

*You will reflect on the fact that these “instructions” are becoming less and less instructive.*

Or one, who (like me), went off to teach in a multilingual context:

*Profanity sounds the same in every language.*

Within the context of Egan’s story, each of these lines is directed toward Lulu, Egan’s disembodied narration managing the spy’s psychic state as she fends off mafiosos, stanches gunshot wounds, and questions her commitment to a life of espionage. Out of context, though, I found it quite easy as a beginning teacher to apply them to my experience.

It's not that the story is a covert teaching manifesto, per se, but rather "Black Box" lent its content to such an application – in the context of the moment, that 2012 teacher prep course, and my particular life – by virtue of its form, each line singled-out like poetic-fruit ripe for writing with. A close read of the text reveals this applicable property, and more importantly helps us start to understand why I worked with it in my poem, and how the text maps onto my particular experience as an English teacher.

### **Your job is to be forgotten yet still present.**

A consideration of the unusual voice of Egan's story further nuances my literary experience with it. Written in the 2nd person—each statement directed at an ambiguous 'You'— "Black Box" reads as a kind of memory-laden mission log, the narrator speaking as if observing Lulu from a distant, future position while also betraying intimate knowledge of her psyche. As she encounters various plot obstacles (e.g., abandonment at a criminal compound; a furious woman holding a gun and a baby), the voice advises Lulu directly, with comforting expertise and directive confidence, e.g., "You will encounter this...", or "If this happens, do this...". Ostensibly this voice is that of Lulu's "Field Instructions", guiding her as she progresses through the mission. But its disembodied quality comes to take on a prophetic eeriness. As the story unfurls, the voice anticipates what our protagonist will encounter; and despite its nuance, the voice is always right. Read through the lens of my experience, the voice is undeniably *pedagogical*<sup>5</sup>. Egan's spy is taught, over and over again and every step of the way, by a disembodied instructor, a spectral educator whose vision is nothing short of uncanny.

As an emerging teacher I longed for such a guide, as I imagine many do; the great disappointment of maturing as a professional (and person) is that we learn such guides don't exist. How comforting, though, to read a story where everything is spelled out so clearly. The voice proves, by turns, poetic (*The Mediterranean is vast enough to have once seemed infinite.*); grandly philosophical (In the new heroism, the goal is to transcend individual life, with its petty pains and loves, in favor of the dazzling collective.); abstractly wise (*Experience leaves a mark, regardless of the reasons and principles behind it.*); and coldly pragmatic (*Assuming there is no artery involvement, wounds to the upper limbs are preferable.*). Stranger still: the voice of Egan's narrator demonstrates intimate insight into her psyche, including private memories of her husband, father, and childhood, as well as in-the-moment feelings of terror, amusement, resignation, and repulsion. As such, there are times in "Black Box" where it seems like Lulu is speaking to herself as some one or thing other than herself, where there is no other explanation than that her conscience has come online. For example:

*Lying with girlfriends on a still-warm dock in upstate New York, watching shooting stars, is a sensation you remember after many years.*

Curious here is the passive voice: rather than "I remember lying..." or even "You sensed that...", Egan chooses this oddly impersonal construction, a rendering of a memory without the syntax of feeling or subjectivity. The next statement completes the movement back to the disembodied voice, wise and reflective and entirely separate from Lulu's perspective:

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<sup>5</sup> In a subsequent interview, Egan revealed that: the working title of the piece was 'Lessons Learned.' The idea was that with each move [Lulu] makes, or each thing that happens to her, she has a kind of

reflection, which has a bit of a didactic quality to it. I always imagined her observations happening in this very atomized way; that was just inherent in the voice itself. (Triesman, 2012, para. 4)



*Hindsight creates the illusion that your life has led you inevitably to the present moment.*

Still, the voice demonstrates impossible knowledge of what's going on inside Lulu's head, and in that sense, she's telling the story herself, to herself. Considering the appeal of this to a first year teacher, I understand that "Black Box" textualized for me something all teachers learn in time: that the relationship between theory and practice is not at all what we expected; that the impossible demands of teaching in far-flung future contexts we've never been to, with persons we've never met, render all educational theory weak<sup>6</sup>; that learning to teach, if we stay in it long enough, is every educator's own intellectual work (and we're better for it). In an important way, it may be that the act of becoming teacher cleaves our inner voice in two, like cell division, the event of my first year leading me to say to myself:

*You will reflect on the fact that you must return home the same person you were when you left.*

And also:

*You will reflect on the fact that you've been guaranteed you will not be the same person.*

And of course, as any graduate of a teacher prep program intimately knows (Fendler, 2003):

*You will reflect on the fact that too much reflection is pointless.*

In this sense, my experience with "Black Box" is something like that of Tim O'Brien's revelation at the end of *The Things They Carried* (2009):

*I'm skimming across the surface of my own history, moving fast, riding the melt beneath the blades, doing loops and spins, and when I take a high leap into the dark and come down thirty years later, I realize it as Tim trying to save Timmy's life with a story. (p. 273)*

Such an insight can be learned through experience, certainly, but in my case, Egan's story, by way of the author's decision to have Lulu tell herself a story on the page through the disembodied voice of the narrator bearing down on her (all those "You's"), provided an opportunity for me to see—or rather hear—it.

**Imagining yourself as a dot of light on a screen is oddly reassuring.**

The central metaphor of Egan's text – the black box – proves particularly fruitful for this reading of teacher experience. Near the end of "Black Box", shit hits the proverbial fan, and the baby-holding woman shoots an escaping Lulu in the shoulder. The narrator's voice implores Lulu to remain conscious as she flees to the extraction point. *Your physical person is our black box, writes Egan. Without it, we have no record of what has happened on your mission.* Most immediately, this statement reflects the critical intel gathered by our hero during the mission; we've just witnessed Lulu perform a Data Surge, in which she removes a plug from between her toes (not making this up) and downloads information from a kingpin's

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<sup>6</sup> "What a life adds up to is a problem and an open question." (Stewart, 2008, p. 72). Here's Stewart's rendering of the original Sedgwick (2003): *weak theory*:

comes unstuck from its own line of thought to follow the objects it encounters, or becomes undone by its attention to things that don't just add up but take on a life of their own as problems for thought...she calls this 'reparative' theory'....in contrast to 'paranoid' or

'strong' theory that defends itself against the puncturing of its dream of a perfect parallelism between the analytic subject, her concept, and the world (p. 72).

Which is to say: insofar as teaching involves the ambiguity of lives encountering each other, we'll fail to fully explain it. Which is fine.

phone, “feel[ing] the surge as the data floods [her] body”. But we might also consider the imperative to preserve the “record of what has happened” as a reference to the disembodied voice itself, its speech over the course of the story grooving a neurological trace in Lulu’s brain which may yet prove useful to other agents on future missions.

In aviation a black box is an electronic recording device placed in the plane for the purpose of facilitating an investigation in the event of a crash. Certainly, too many novice teachers, especially those, like me, woefully underprepared by the all-too-brief preparation of alternative certification, crash-land in their classrooms. I don’t mean to suggest, however, that the work of education scholars is to conduct that investigation—that’d be an autopsy—but rather that the crucial record of teaching upon which we ought to build scholarship rests with persons themselves. We are reminded (we somehow always need to be reminded) that “education is not an interaction between robots but an encounter between human beings” (Biesta, 2013, p. 1). As such I understand this work as of a piece with assets-based approaches to literacy and English instruction (e.g., Kirkland, 2013; Kinloch et al., 2017; Watson & Beymer, 2019) which understand the in- and out-of-school lives of students and less-so teachers as assets to curriculum and instruction. Closely reading the capacious and complicated life of a teacher through the lens of a single text—a type of black box investigation—can make of the profession something different, reframing teaching as an extension of teachers’ lives, as creative and communal, compelling, complex and deeply personal work in ways that prove fruitful for both teachers and students.

### **No beauty is really a beauty.**

Over the course of this inquiry, my approach to close reading also revealed the practice’s limitations. In the field of computing, in contrast to aviation, “black

box” has a different definition. Rather than a readily accessible record to be recovered, the term refers to a complex piece of equipment—a transistor, an engine, an algorithm, the human brain—whose contents are mysterious to the user. Engineers can observe the box’s inputs and outputs, but its implementation remains opaque; we’re essentially in the dark. This second definition helps make sense of a major blind spot in my reading of Egan’s story.

It took the honest feedback of a colleague who read both an early draft of this paper and Egan’s story itself to call attention to the absence of engagement with one of the story’s primary themes: in her words, “the ways women are objectified”, Lulu’s body serving as “the main character” as she navigates “subjugation and sexualization”. Rereading the story through this lens, my omission seems obvious, negligent. The story opens with a reductive, bodily description of what makes Lulu necessary (“giggles, bare legs, shyness” [para. 1]), before reflecting on the comic sexism of violent masculinity: “some powerful men actually call their beauties ‘Beauty’” (para. 2). Such commentary contextualizes the story’s opening sequence, in which Lulu acquiesces to a violent sexual encounter in service to her mission. The Voice of her Field Instructions counsels her: “Throwing back your head and closing your eyes allows you to give the appearance of sexual readiness while concealing revulsion” (para. 6). Here the story first introduces the cybernetic equipment which aids the rest of the mission: Lulu performs her “Dissociation Technique” to distance herself from the experience of violation.

All of which powerfully shapes the story to come and the lens through which I read it. Starting with that scene, I clearly need to rethink, for example, the ethical imperatives of Lulu’s mission, and the Voice counseling her, if it understands her body as a necessary sacrifice for the good of national security. I have to further reread the misogyny of the criminals Lulu deals with on her mission against the misogyny

of a cultural ethos which understands women as expendable, whose trauma is to be expected. (Of the sexual component of her mission, Lulu is told directly: “You will not be the same person’ [para. 15] you were before.”) Through this lens the story does not seem all that futuristic. Rather, in the advent of #metoo accounts, we (really, men) are now publicly having an ongoing conversation about the ways Lulu’s experience reflects the normalized violence women endure.

That I chose not to write through this lens is a kind of black box in itself, the inner workings of which are worth closely reading through here. I can understand the metaphor like this: as input, Egan’s story; as output, the initial drafts of this paper, which said little of gender and nothing of sexual violence or sexualization or subjugation or misogyny. The black box, the inner process that produced that writing. One immediate and primary explanation: my perspective as a man writing about the experience of reading this story made such ignorance possible. Feminist thought has long pointed to the ways that a man’s life is largely about being by turns cognizant and ignorant of violence against women, of the ways our worlds are built and rely upon that violence, including one’s own. That I reproduced that here in part, initially, is further confirmation of one of the strongest findings in cultural history (e.g., de Beauvoir, 1949, 2011; MacKinnon, 1991; Wollstonecraft, 1792, 1999).

Further my failure can also be tied, I think, to the ways I encountered the text, including through this process of close reading. My first encounter in that teacher education course, in which I created the found poems, was a necessarily partial one, as I cut lines from one page of the story’s 17 *New Yorker* pages.

The ones I cut didn’t involve the scenes which bring the story’s thematic misogyny into sharpest relief; lines that did speak to that were ones I simply chose not take up in my poem and, subsequently, in my analysis here. I spent time above detailing the value of that activity for my learning, but it’s clearly worth considering what is lost by that approach: how it made it possible for me to miss a major point of the story and, again, fail to attend to and disrupt misogyny. This subsequent rereading makes me consider the women who shared that teacher education classroom with me the day I encountered this story: what did they read in Egan’s text? How might it have mirrored the precarious experiences of their lives? What does it mean to teach with that? And do they even need to closely read this type of story?

**“ . . . a text can leave a record – evidence to be read, returned to, learned from – of a teacher’s work and the life in which it occurs. . . ”**

Taking up that last question, the choice to close read at all may have contributed to that failure. The primary criticism of close formalist analysis, particularly as it became institutionalized in the US by the New Critics (who were largely men themselves), was that its strict emphasis on literary

form produced apolitical, and so culturally reproductive, modes of reading and writing. Critics in this vein understood the close reading approach as in direct conflict with, for example, modes of feminist critique which would clearly have pointed to themes I missed reading “Black Box”. Yet, as feminist theorist Gallop (2000) argues in her defense of close reading, we can also understand the value of the practice as calling us “to listen closely to the Other” (p. 17). In that sense, it may be that my reading of Egan’s story is both a failure of close reading (as a patriarchal practice) and evidence of my own failure at close reading (in Gallop’s way), of looking at what is actually on the page – namely, the precarious

experience of women in misogynistic societies both future and present.

**An immediate exit is advisable.**

Form, content, voice, metaphor: the close reading I've performed here has attempted to implicate the textual properties of a story with/in my experience, how that intersection might be understood as a moment in a literary life. I argue a text can leave a record – evidence to be read, returned to, learned from – of a teacher's work and the life in which it occurs, and so Egan's story proves useful for theorizing the intersection of texts and teachers' lives. The work here has begun to excavate that record in my own textual experience, to comb it and in doing so make sense of a life and how it emerges within the profession of teaching in conversation with particular texts. *Your Field Instructions, stored in a chip beneath your hairline, will serve as both a mission log and a guide for others undertaking this work.* In reading Egan's story closely, I've worked to make sense of my past as a beginning teacher: how the event of the found poetry activity in which I encountered "Black Box" shaped my future teaching philosophy; how the genres of science fiction and espionage mapped onto my experience as a subversive teacher in a foreign land; how the particular demands of learning to teach cleaved my consciousness in two—a professional self and a personal one. And, how this work of (re)turning to the text, now, becomes an attempt at reading-as-self-recovery, a weak (because I could have chosen other texts, certainly) reparative (Sedgwick, 2003) approach to that split.

In exploring the intersection of literature and the lives of teachers, this paper makes a case for the

literary as a useful mode for being and teaching in classrooms, and for the literariness of the lives caught up in those classrooms: how the literary properties of texts inhere within, influence and implicate lives. Further, in complicating the work of teaching and blurring the lines between person and text, life and curriculum, practice and possibility, I understand this work as contributing to the broader project of reimagining possibilities for the public good, of both teachers and students, in a time where rampant burnout, teacher shortages, and dehumanizing research and pedagogy (Paris & Winn, 2013) demand new and concerted action which makes lives more livable. Literariness, understood relationally, and as unfolded through a careful study of text, offers one way of giving some meaningful form to life as a teacher.

**“Literariness, understood relationally, and as unfolded through a careful study of text, offers one way of giving some meaningful form to life as a teacher.”**

At the same time, this experience has left me ambivalent, and it's clear that a strictly formalist treatment of texts via conventional close readings are not enough, as my final analysis of the misogyny in "Black Box" demonstrates. Gallop's (2000) pedagogical vision of an ethical

close reading helps to address this shortcoming, because for her close reading requires not only attending to "unusual vocabulary, words repeated, images, metaphors, etc." (p. 7) but also attending closely to the other in the writing. Theorized this way, the practice is not just about analyzing text but also about listening to and learning from the other, which harbors some hope for the practice as "a means to a more just treatment of others" (p. 17). This is because close reading requires us to read "NOT what SHOULD BE on the page but what IS" (p. 17, capitalization in the original); it is a method which (attempts to) reserve judgment, avoid generalized assumption and the essentialism of stereotype, and instead be ethically open to the other. Taking up this

approach may have helped me to see Lulu's sexualization and subjugation as essential themes worth taking up in my reading and analysis. A Gallopian reading applies to texts as well as to encounters with others in our lives, and as such it offers a promising frame for educators and education researchers: as a way of taking seriously the literary experiences of a particular life with a particular text. Put differently, through this lens a close and creative reading is always already a relational one; there is no official curriculum meaningfully separate from the people in the classroom. It shouldn't be lost on us that it took feedback from my colleague to point to the necessity of this way of reading; it wasn't something I did as a man reading the text on my own. English teachers would do well, I think, to consider what this insight means for themselves, their students, and all the varied texts of their lives.

In addition, the surprising resonance of this work, the story of a cybernetic femme fatale in twenty-thirties France, with me, a 22-year old man teaching English along the Texas-Mexico border in 2012, suggests teachers and researchers might nuance understandings of how we prize and act upon the notion of textual relevance in English classrooms. What I mean is that, from a pedagogical perspective, the text might not be a clear fit with me, e.g., given my experience, or along lines of identity or genre. A teacher might not pick out "Black Box" as relevant to

my particular life; I'd likely not have picked it up myself without the intervention of my teacher and a little chance, as it wouldn't have seemed the most relevant to me. And yet my writing above embodies the significant ways the story *did* matter to me. Work on relevance over the last few decades has done much to diversify and humanize English classrooms, and I don't mean to be critical of that scholarship. I don't want to suggest we shouldn't choose texts that are relevant to students' particular lives. But perhaps one limitation of the notion of relevance is an *a priori* one: identifying a text as relevant often works from a place of assumption, made by both teachers and students, which an inquiry such as this challenge. Still: it is crucial that teachers further diversify English curriculum, given the historic lack of textual diversity and the ongoing diversification of public school populations. I suggest then that scholars further complicate our sense of relevance and the heterogeneity of youth experience with an expanded sense of the possibility of *resonance*, a notion that seeks to understand textual connection *across* difference.<sup>7</sup> Careful study of the events in which this mysterious phenomenon happens (e.g., Beymer & Jarvie, 2020) would help, and texts themselves often offer one place to start. The strange resonances within and across texts, times, genres and persons offers a *rich, deep crawl space of possibilities* for pushing the field of English education further toward more ethical and beautiful futures for all.

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<sup>7</sup> Put differently, resonance, I argue, pushes curriculum to be more, not less, diverse as it challenges the at-times lazy resort to identity-as-stereotype, encouraging educators to engage with

the abundance of differences which mark any particular person in the room.



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