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# Literary Art in Digital Performance: The Technological and Digital Evolution of American Identity

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**Abstract:** The aim of this project is to discuss the ongoing evolution of American identity through the influence of technology and the New Media. We will look at how technology and digitalization have contributed to altering and challenging the concept of identity, and their consequent redefinition of concepts such as individualism, privacy and freedom. The focus of this research is to analyze the relationship between technology and identity in literature, observing how literature, as a mirror of society, portrays the problematization of identity. This case study will look at five influential novels in American literature, examine examples ranging from the telegraph, to the modern Internet.

After a broad discussion where we will define both individualism and identity, we will then narrow down our analysis to the novels, which chronologically trace a path and consequently lead us to the current challenges in defining an American identity.

The ultimate aim of this research is to find a possible definition for the new concept of American identity, and thus to respond to the question “Who are We?”, the unresolved question that best exemplifies the ongoing dilemma in defining America’s National identity.

Key words: identity, self, individualism, technology, New Media, American literature, American culture.

## MATERIAL AND METHOD

The basic material for this research consisted of writings of American authors, from the 1880s up to the present. The working methods used in this essay were the corpus of selected texts, consequently interpreted through critical analysis.

### 1. Introduction: What is the American Identity?

How do we define identity? This question is the necessary premise to explaining and thus providing a possible definition of both individualism and identity. In this essay, we will consider both identity and individualism with a shared significance. These two terms both refer to self-reliance and describe the individual’s ability to achieve self-awareness separate from the needs of the group. Given this premise, cultural identity, which will be thoroughly discussed in this research, is the attempt to belong to a group or, more specifically, it is a person’s self-perception as belonging to a group, consequently defined by concepts such as ethnicity, nationality, and social class. In this way, cultural identity is constructed both by the individual and the nationalistic culture that shapes the individual’s sense of belonging.

Shifting our analysis to American culture, the definition of identity has generated an extensive debate that culminates in what historians define as an “identity crisis”, representing the ongoing controversy in the interpretation of identity in America. Thus, it is revealing to note how, in the American context, the question “Who are We?”, which best describes America’s preoccupation with identity, remains strangely unresolved. Today, American identity is an ever-expanding context wherein future analysts would find it hard to identify what is American. However, before focusing our analysis on the influence of technology on identity, it is essential to first look at those elements that have altered this issue.

Since its birth, America has always been searching for a national identity, yet the first hint of individualism came from the Founding Fathers who structured and envisioned the democratic and liberal image of the country. It is only through their quest for national integrity and the association of America with a promised land, where individualism and freedom were finally possible, that they shaped the first image of individuality, creating a new way of re-thinking about the self. American individualism, and the consequent re-definition of identity, are deeply rooted in the Founding Fathers’ philosophy, whose theories planted the seeds for an exclusivism that still defines American culture and the country’s nationalistic identification.

The second interesting aspect that compromised American individualism is the increasing ethnic variety. This ethnic and racial variation is changing the identity of the country. Once more, Americanism becomes incredibly hard to define. An explicit concern on this topic was proposed by Samuel P. Huntington who in his book, *Who Are We? The Challenges of America’s National Identity* (2004), expressed his preoccupation with how America’s quest for a single and exclusive individualism has become rather impossible in a country based on pluri- and multicultural identities. In other words Huntington asserts that America’s unique identity today is grounded on its immigrant legacy. Despite Huntington’s concerns, this ethnoculturalism is what distinguishes the United States from other countries. Living in America today means the acquisition of an identity in strict contact with other races and cultures.

The final and most recent identity crisis in America was originated by the tragedy of September 11<sup>th</sup>, a day that brought into question and reshaped the national morale. September 11<sup>th</sup> has been one of the most massive attacks at the very heart of America, and one rare example in the nation's history of foreign war on America's own soil. In its aftermath, 9/11 eroded the shared faith of the country and destroyed America's sense of invulnerability. For the first time, Americans saw their nation endangered being deprived of their sense of national identity. The tragic effects of this event swept away American values of freedom, individualism, and privacy, and the country suddenly became a place that epitomizes America's vulnerability to terrorism. Furthermore, 9/11 deprived Americans of that sense of exceptionalism, also known as "manifest destiny," that consists on the frequent refrain of seeing America as an exceptional country and has recently represented the effort to spread democracy throughout the world. Americans today, still struggle for their own interpretations of democracy after 9/11. Since then, American foreign wars have been often seen as an effort to promote democracy for the making of an identity. Considering this statement, 9/11 has also been defined as a "play of cultural identity"<sup>1</sup>, consequently generating an unimaginable breach that controverted America's core values. In Huntington's words, "the tragic events of September 11<sup>th</sup> dramatically brought that identity back to the fore."<sup>2</sup> Quoting anthropologist Cheryl Mattingly, "September 11<sup>th</sup> and its aftermath have provided an occasion for re-thinking and re-working cultural identity."<sup>3</sup>

Let us now widen the scope of our argument to include technology, investigating how the digital domain further contributes to altering and threatening the concepts of individualism and society. Let us first start our analysis drawing back the attention to the definition of individualism. Individuality indicates a way of thinking about the self and one's own community. Technology and the New Media, thanks to long distance communication, change the way we relate to others. In the case of American society, individualism no longer explains the relationship between self and other. As media expert Catherine Waite explains,

"American culture will suffer the consequences of the technological revolution more profoundly than any other; because the concept of American Individualism is foundational to its democratic way of life...any form of technology... can impact cultural values [and] digital Technologies encourage, not the individual voice, but the collective voices of the many."<sup>4</sup>

It is then evident how this problematization of the self, generated by the obsessive and incessant use of technology in our present world, increasingly transforms America's cultural identity. Furthermore, in this project, we will exclusively look at those technological innovations that express the dualism between self and technology. Before narrowing down our analysis to these technological means, gradually shifting our attention to literature, let us first consider the concept of "virtual self". This term refers to the creation of a second identity, sociologists define as virtual (on the wire or unrealistic), which inevitably destabilizes our self-awareness as we live a dual identity: the realistic one, that of the individual, and the virtual one, originated by the use of technology. To better understand this concept, we may use Ben Agger's definition of "virtual self" to clarify the issue we will face in the next part of this research. He states,

"By "virtual self" I am referring to the person connected to the world and to others through electronic means such as the Internet, television, and cell phones. Virtuality is the experience of being online and using computers; it is a state of being, referring to a particular way of experiencing and interacting with the world."<sup>5</sup>

Even though Agger's definition relies on modern technologies, in the following part of this study, we will see how the concept of "virtual self" was present in other technological means that anticipated the virtuality expressed by modern digitalization. Consequently, any form of technology changes the special patterns of human activity, threatens the concepts of privacy and freedom (displaying the self on line), and thus changes the balance between social cohesion and individuality. In his travelogue across America, French sociologist and philosopher, Jean Baudrillard, discusses how the "hyperreality" of modern technologies has provided a new way for navigating a virtual world, in which the Internet inevitably generates a hyperreal terrain representing a simulation of our realistic society. Baudrillard continues his line of thought in the analysis of a virtual space in a cybernetic America in which the self/operator is inevitably questioned by computers in a process defined as "hypnosis of identity." Yet one of his most common reflections was based on historicity and, more precisely, on his attempt to look at modern technologies and progress as being responsible for the collapse of the concept historical progress. In a society ruled by digital technologies, the decline of the very idea of historical progress is thus inevitable. In this scenario, the "virtual self" lives in the absolute contemporaneity in an anti-historical perspective.

Nevertheless, the massive technological advancements breached the boundaries between human body and technology. Aligning with this theory, Donna Haraway explains how modern technologies blend together the body into the technological machine. Humans in our contemporary world are destined to become machines or, as Haraway defines them, "cyborgs," human constraints with a massive technological influence that changes the ethics of the human body. This transformation of the human body into technological machine eventually changes our approach to technologies. Narrowing down the focus to the literary analysis, literature has often depicted the ways in which technology can be understood in relation to the human body. The literary example par excellence of the integration of body and technologies can be found in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), in which an inanimate creature is assembled through lifeless bodies and brought to life via electricity. The novel unveils the power of electric technology and illustrates one of the first examples of a human body that can also be technological. Another interesting discussion on the merging between human

body and technology was suggested by Tim Armstrong who, in his analysis, referred to modernist writers and their capacity to discuss the complex interconnections between body and technology in a moment of rapid technological changes. Literature over the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century has represented how technological advancements have redefined the relation between body and machine. As the centuries and technologies progressed, it was almost impossible to maintain a clear distinction between human body and technology. In this way, technology is a key factor in defining our identity and our bodily relation to the driving force of the century, digital technology.

Yet, in the technological debate, I believe literature deserves a larger investigation, considering its fundamental role in shaping cultural identity. Literature has an incessant source of input- social, historical and cultural- that further contribute to defining our perception of cultural individualism. In this way, literature becomes one of the fundamental elements that helps us define identity in American culture. To conclude our introduction, further evidence of the problematization of identity has been generated by the evolution of technologies.

## 2. How Literature rewrites Identity through Technology: the case of the telegraph

It is often alleged that in American literature novelists have always expressed an incessant quest for identity that soon became one of the hallmarks of America's literary tradition. Fragmentation and self-awareness become two of the crucial topics in American narratives. American literature has always been fascinated with the split self, delineated by the figure of the outcast, who defines American individualism by acquiring his own personal integrity.

Getting back to the relationship between identity and technology, by browsing the index of American novels, one finds a considerable number of titles centering on the problematization of the self, caused by the advancement of technologies. In the following and central part of this research, we get to the core of this analysis by looking at five American novels that display the dualism identity-technology. The novels that will be analyzed in this part are: *Wired Love: A Romance of Dots and Dashes* (1879) by Ella Cheever Thayer, *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1889) by Mark Twain, *The Broom of the System* (1987) by David Foster Wallace, *Chronicle City* (2009) by Jonathan Lethem and Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2010). We can consider this analysis as a literary voyage through literature, history and culture, re-iterating the development of technology and its process of re-defining and questioning individuality. We will start from the Victorian Internet; that is the telegraph, gradually leading toward the modern-day Internet and social media networks.

Generally defined as the precursor of wire communications and the modern Internet, the telegraph revolutionized technology and communication at the dawn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the United States, between the 1840s and the 1880s, this innovation diffused not only a sense of general optimism, but also gained its acclaim thanks to its ability to expand America's horizons, changing our perception of time and space in a very extensive new country. However, it has been widely recognized that the telegraph provided the setting for modern communication techniques. A precursor of modern computers and on line communication, the telegraph brought changes in our language and ordinary knowledge. This innovative technological device was seen as a new way of reporting, using a new form of knowledge. The telegraph created a whole new way of thinking through technological communication and breached the boundaries of human interaction. All this transformation led to a deeper relationship between technology and ideology, in which the telegraph became one of the first examples of blending tradition and culture with technological advancement.

Considering the influence of the telegraph in America and its innovative power in terms of communication, it is also interesting to note its capacity to first put to the test the concept of identity and individualism. As Lisa Gitman and Geoffrey Pingrey suggested in their study of New Media from 1740 to 1915, "the telegraph generated what has been defined as 'Identity Masquerade,' some kind of meditation in the ways communication can be used to negotiate embodiment,"<sup>6</sup> a real masquerade under false identities. Critical theory has demonstrated how "cyberspace allows one to pick an identity, to masquerade, mimic and transcend bodily identities and interact with the world as somebody else."<sup>7</sup> This phenomenon, with which we are familiar with in our digital age, determines a communication based on an invisible and hidden identity "on the wire."

An effective example of this play of identity through wire communication is found in the novel *Wired Love: a Romance of Dots and Dashes* written by Ella Cheever Thayer in 1879. Both a telegraphist and a novelist, Thayer was capable of constructing a delightful, original and extremely contemporary novel easily comparable to a modern internet dating. *Wired Love* revolves around the figure of Nattie, a telegraph operator, and Clem, a mysterious man she has mistakenly intercepted on the wire. The plot unfolds with various twists, plus a case of hidden identities. In fact, the two protagonists ignore their genders and their reciprocal names. Thayer's interesting description in the following passage summarizes the enigmatic nature of identity through telegraphy. She writes,

"Miss Natty Rogers going home to that back room of hers, found herself still pondering upon the probable sex of "C." To her, as yet, there was a certain fascination about telegraphy. But she had a presentiment that in time the charm would give place to monotony...As she lighted the gas in the room, she thought not of these things that were so often in her mind, but of "C", and then scolded herself for caring whether that distant individual was a man or a woman."<sup>7</sup>

Evidence of their mysterious identities and unrealistic perception of the interlocutor's gender, is found in the passage where the narrator unveils the mystery behind the characters' personalities. Thayer writes: "...and all this time it never occurred to them that excepting 'N' was for Nattie, and 'C' was for Clem, they knew really nothing about each other, not

even their real names.”<sup>8</sup> Nattie and Clem exchange messages under what I define as “encrypted identities” or, using its modern definition, those virtual selves we have already discussed in the first part of this essay. The story reveals the creation of virtual identity, which anticipates our online world. In such an interpretative approach, technological and telegraphic identity eventually becomes invisible. Chapter Three titled, “Visible and Invisible Friends,” also confirms this concept. Even though the two lovers like each other in real life, they seem quite uncomfortable in using verbal communication. Clem asserts, “It is nicer talking on the wire, isn’t it? ...a wire is so necessary to our happiness.”<sup>9</sup> Not surprisingly, the novel ends with the two protagonists both in the attempt to re-start telegraphing their love.

Without a doubt, the most thrilling aspect of this novel is its parallel with our present world. The loss of identity through technology and the need for communication through a technological means prefigures the scenario we are living in our present. A memorable passage foretells the modernity of this timeless story. The narrator reports,

“We will soon be able to do everything by electricity; who knows but some genius will invent something for the especial use of lovers? Something, for instance, to carry in their pockets, so when they are far away from each other, and pine for a sound of ‘that beloved voice,’ they will have only to take up this electrical apparatus, put it to their ears, and be happy. Ah blissful lovers of the future.”<sup>10</sup>

Following the vicissitudes of two telegraphists who first experience identity problems through electric communication, Ella Cheever Thayer addresses concepts we are facing today such as communication difficulties and identity problems caused by technology. This novel represents one of the very first examples of identity theft and the first challenging experience of an unrealistic cyber-self.

Our literary analysis now shifts chronologically to Mark Twain and the humorously contrasted protagonist of his novel *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court* (1889). In this literary recounting of a voyage to the medieval past by a disoriented modern American Yankee, who mysteriously finds himself at the British court of King Arthur, identity plays a key role in the story’s complex relationship with technology. In fact, what lies beneath a genuinely humorous novel, is a real *mise-en-scène* of an identity stuck between past and present. While great inventions advanced, Mark Twain was one of the most fervent among American writers in his praise of technology. It is no surprise then that this novel has been regarded as one of his most famous portrayals of those technologies that subverted society at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Before considering the split self narrated by Twain through his protagonist, Hank Morgan, let us first outline the plot. Hank Morgan, a 19<sup>th</sup> century American from Connecticut, is accidentally transported back in time to 6<sup>th</sup> century England, where he feels the need to mitigate the cruel medieval past by sharing his knowledge of modern future. It is thus interesting to observe how Hank Morgan “modernizes” the past through technology; he will bring the telephone and the telegraph in the 6<sup>th</sup> century. In order to survive in a past too cruel to accept such modern innovations, the protagonist is forced to create a false identity in his popularization of these technologies, being mistaken for a magician or, as the courtesans rename him, a “Boss.” It is in fact technology, inexistent in the Arthurian age, which re-shapes a new character. Morgan adopts a new identity in the past to be able to use and promote the technology in the future. His necessity for colonization through the contribution of innovations as telephone and telegraph in the past is described in the following quote, in which the protagonist ponders on his decision to create a modern 6<sup>th</sup> century, expressing his discontent in living in a non-technological past. He states,

“I excused myself for the present; I said it would take me three or four years yet to get things well fixed up and going smoothly...We had another large departure to hand, too. This was a telegraph and a telephone; our first venture in this line...It sounded good! In this atmosphere of telephones and lighting communication with distant regions, I was breathing the breath of life again after long suffocation.”<sup>11</sup>

To support this claim, the relation with identity is fundamental for any interpretation of the novel. In all of its different and yet similar manifestations of split self, the identity of Twain’s protagonist is always dualistic and divided between past and present, America and Britain, technological system and non-technological society. Hank Morgan’s identity is challenged by the use of technology, whose distribution in medieval times generates a virtual unrealistic self in the past. Furthermore, he is not only divided between centuries, but even between countries, America and England respectively modern and old. Consequently, Twain’s protagonist is bouncing from past to present on an identity quest that he never accomplishes. As Morgan affirms in chapter 37 in reference to his identity, “I no longer resembled my former self.”<sup>12</sup> This statement clearly illustrates the fragmented self-crisis of Twain’s protagonist, where the role of technology contributes, once more, to evolving and re-discussing identity.

In addition to this interpretation, Lisa McGunigal proposed to read the novel as a performance of identities, where “Mark Twain embodies performance both through his own identity and that of the character of Hank Morgan.”<sup>13</sup> Morgan adopts a false name and pretends to have a different identity to use technology, thus becoming a new person and a new character. In a similar way, McGunigal sees this play of identities being represented in the life of Mark Twain himself who adopted an alternate identity as a writer, a pseudonym leaving behind his original name. Hank Morgan performs his new identity using clothes, gestures and appearances from the Arthurian era, refusing a British identity eventually forcing people even to speak in American vernacular. His technological miracles can be seen as a clear performance of technologization, where Hank performs his identity through modern inventions in a dualism between identity theft and identity performance. I consider this novel to be a rich, multi-layered example of identity fraud and the acquisition of a

new challenging self. Aligning with McGunigal, according to whom “the performer often must decide between constantly exchanging identities or abandoning one for the sake of a memorable show,”<sup>14</sup> Hank Morgan conforms to the image of an active performer who chooses a show through technological inventions in an attempt to revive an identity that belongs to modernity.

As technology progresses toward digitalization and modern computers, in the American literature of the 1980s, David Foster Wallace was the writer who best depicted the identity crisis in a moment of substantial technological changes. He envisioned the way in which technologies would affect our daily lives, not only predicting evolution, but also discussing how they would eventually lead to the emergence of new anxieties.

Tracing the historical roots of technological progress, the 1980s made our modern world. A considerable number of innovations that define our life today got their start in the 1980s. Videocassettes, cellphones and home computers made the revolution that still influences our present reality. This is the reason why in the discussion of identity and technological development, David Foster Wallace’s narratives are worth being mentioned. Wallace represents the fascinating bridge between the first technological era and the age of digital revolution.

Among Wallace’s novels *The Broom of the System* (1989) deserves considerable attention for its central focus on a realistic crisis of the self. One of the key aspects of Wallace’s narratives is an extensive thematic approach to failure, expressed by identity fragmentation and lack of completion, and generated by digital and technological innovations. All these characteristics are encompassed in the protagonist of *The Broom of the System*, Lenore Bedsman. A telephone operator in a society immersed in the technological revolution, Lenore does not have an identity per se, though others constantly define her in an intricate web of characters progressively rebounding her from one identity to the other. In her relationship with all of the characters, the protagonist’s function resides outside her self. For one of the characters, Rich, Lenore is indispensable to bringing the absolute other inside her personal self.

In addition to this dilemma, telephone operators faking their identities contribute to Lenore’s lack of integrity. Yet the telephone, as previously discussed with the telegraph, generates the same “identity masquerade,” where through invisibility one can fake his or her identity on the line. Wallace’s novel is filled with transcended bodily identities at Lenore’s workplace. Here is one of the innumerable examples of identity switch via telephone, as one of Lenore’s colleagues pretends to be someone else, intercepting calls for Lenore. Wallace writes, “...He keeps pretending it’s different people asking for you, holding his nose, putting a hankie over the phone, trying this totally pitiful English accent, pretending it’s outside calls for you...”.<sup>15</sup> Lenore eventually becomes a pastiche of all the characters in the novel. She does not have one identity per se, but many, each shaped by how people decide to define her.

The first challenge of identity comes from Lenore’s grandmother who sends out a powerful message on the linguistic meaning of the word “broom,” affirming that something’s meaning is nothing more or less than its function. Applying this concept to Lenore’s life it is then obvious why others challenge her fragile self. Even her grandmother responds to the identity crisis, and as Lenore notes, “Grandma Lenore perceived loss of identity without function.”<sup>16</sup> To better summarize this concept, Lenore has fears of both lack of an identity and lack of control in her life. Given this statement, Wallace narrates a system unable to define itself thanks to innovation technologies that alter both the self and the other. The changeability of the system is well-described in a key definition of society and its evolution through technologies in the following statement,

“The technological changes alone that they have stood witness to are staggering. How might one even begin to orient himself with respect to such a series of changes in the fundamental features of the world? How to begin to come to some understanding of one’s place in a system, when someone is a part of an area that exists in such a troubling relation to the rest of the world, a world that is itself stripped of any static, understandable character by the fact that it changes, radically, all the time?”<sup>17</sup>

This debate blending together identity and technology, is at the heart of *The Broom of the System*, in which Foster Wallace describes, with an exuberant narrative energy, the evolution of a system that is well on its way to jeopardizing both identity and culture.

### 3. Identity in the Age of Digitalization: the Case of the Internet

If the first innovations tacitly began to display the dilemma of individualism through technology, in the age of New Media this crisis is far more persistent. The authors we are going to analyze in the final part of this essay describe the debate on the self in the age of digitalization through the Internet, social networks and electronic devices.

Before concentrating our analysis on the critical interpretation of the novels, it is essential to bear in mind that digital media magnifies the identity issue more than any other technological revolution we have witnessed. New Media today transform both culture and reality, redefining our conception of identity. In other words, digitalization has created a strong digital identity framework.

Given this premise, the Internet and the digital domain have generated four main problems. In the first place, the Internet creates a new space, defined as cyberspace, where people can play at identities in an exclusively digital and thus unrealistic online network. Second, is the potential for the creation of a digital identity whose aspects are extremely complex and challenging. This entity may be a person, an operator, someone creating a digital self for exclusive use in cyberspace. Social networks and the Internet offer stylized versions of identities in an unrealistic hyperreality, in which the

Internet suspends the embodied presence. We are inevitably drawn to online environments because of their ability to allow us to play with identities in cyberspace.

In this way, identity becomes public in the age of New Media, which eventually contributes to generating one of the greatest fears in modern America: the destruction of privacy. Furthermore, current philosophical debates express an interesting concern with respect to privacy norms. The ability to access information freely also stealing or appropriating other people's identities represents one of the current threats of networking technologies. With reference to this concept, Henry Giroux, in his essay about selfie culture in contemporary society, theorizes how American identity today is based on a quest for the lack of privacy generated by social media. However, as Giroux points out, in contemporary American society it is easier to risk the lack of privacy in order to put the self on public display. Yet in the information age, American's sense for privacy loses its need to be safeguarded. In this sense, selfies further contribute to challenge the notions of privacy, individualism and freedom, for a mere public display of the self.

Another problem generated by the Internet is the inexistence of a system to identify digital identities. Moreover, Social networks allow two people to see each other. The invisibility we have previously discussed in obsolete electronic devices, such as the telegraph and the telephone, collapses in the Internet age where, besides virtual identity, there is also virtual image. Differently from the telegraph where identity was still mimed but left on the imaginable space of the wire, the Internet generates a digital space mainly created for performing digital identities. Scholars also note that the Internet originates a new ethical space in which personal identities, both real and virtual, are created, negotiated, embodied, and performed. Even so, the Internet facilitates the performance of identity through technology. The result is a virtual identity grounded on an unrealistic cyberspace in which material reality is far more distant to what is performed online. Contemporary American literature has reflected the world of digitalization through novels that either criticize or praise modern technology.

The first novel to take into consideration, whose narrative structure is based on a computer simulation, is Jonathan Lethem's *Chronic City* (2009). The protagonist, former child actor and current Manhattan social fixture Chase Insteadman, has a real identity crisis due to his complicity with digital Media. Despite an intricate plot enriched by quasi-mythical events (the appearance of a tiger, Chase's fiancée and her segregation in a space station), the metamessage of the novel is complicity with the Internet. Nevertheless, the story is based on long conversations about TV, computers and the "ongoing search for Truth."<sup>18</sup> We can read this quest for the truth as Chase's identity crisis generated by both the need for complicity with technologies and the perplexity inherent in being part of a system we have thus created. With reference to this concept, Isaac Butler interprets this complicity as an act of performance of a disoriented self and obsessive user of digitalization. He states,

"Through Chase's eyes, what we see is an age where we are spectators and consumers, yes, but we're also performers. We're also the ones making the very culture we're the audience for. Via YouTube, Facebook, Blogs, Tumbler, Twitter, Pinterest, through Vimeo and Etsy and Sound cloud and countless other outlets, we are audience and performer at the same time. We can no longer claim—as Wallace does—that a culture is being imposed on us, one that's simultaneously delightful and infantilizing and isolating. We are both halves of the equation now. Whatever happens, we are complicit in it."<sup>19</sup>

Given this statement, I consider New Media and the identity crisis of American culture, in part, as acts performed by Internet users who, by being obsessed and involved with this system, also become active performers in their usage of digital technologies. Jonathan Lethem examines, through fictional characters and an exceedingly enjoyable plot, this age built on complicity and active participation in those electronic systems we have created. This issue of complicity is well explained in one of Chase's monologues discussing self-crisis and digital age involvement. He asserts that,

"In short, some human freedom had been leveraged from view at the level of consciousness itself. Liberty had been narrowed, winnowed, *amnesiated*. Perkus Tooth used the word without explaining—by it he meant something like the Mafia itself would do, a whack, a rubout. Everything that mattered most was a victim in this perceptual murder plot. Further: always to blame was everyone: when rounding up the suspects, begin with yourself. Complicity, including his own, was Perkus Tooth's only doubtless conviction."<sup>20</sup>

As evidence of active participation, digital performance and complicity, this novel emphasizes the way in which technology governs and re-shapes our selves, our private world, and forces us to acquire a new identity, different from the digital one that, suddenly, becomes not what we wanted but what we have want it to be. Considering this interpretation, *Chronic City* shows how we are losing our subjectivity in our constant performing for technology. We are losing our identities becoming objects of digitalization.

To conclude our study, in the literary analysis of identity-technology, it would be incorrect not to mention Jennifer Egan and her acclaimed novel, *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2010). This novel has often been classified as a shift through time of identities, where each chapter expresses a different voice and mood describing the influx of technology over the years. Egan is interested in the way digitalization shapes human experience and illustrates how we think and operate in the language of digitalization. Her preoccupation lies in the evolving nature of identity re-defined by the Internet age. The more the novel progresses, the more its protagonist, Bernie Salazar, an ex-musician and now discographic agent, redefines his identity in a society regulated by text message, computers, TV, and social networks. In one of his numerous statements on digitalization, the protagonist states,

“If we human beings are *information processing machines*, reading X’s and O’s and translating that information into what people oh so breathlessly call “experience,” and if I had not only the information, but the artistry to shape that information using the computer inside my brain (real computers scared me; if you can find Them, then They can find you, and I didn’t want to be found), then, technically speaking was I not having all the same experiences those other people were having?”<sup>21</sup>

This consideration reflects the problems present in our contemporary society: fear of the spread of information, the creation of a public identity and the lack of privacy. Evidence of the erosion of privacy and thus identity, since one concept undermines the other, can also be found in the title of chapter Five of this novel “(You) Plural,”<sup>22</sup> that explains how New Media have forced people to re-think public and private identity. The loss of private identity through computers is also confirmed by Bernie’s statement that, “It seems you can find almost anyone on a computer.”<sup>23</sup> Given this, characters in *A Visit from the Goon Squad* are having a personal self-decline similar to the one in the America they inhabit. The demonstration of how Internet and New Media are part of broad-based changes in our everyday life is also confirmed by Egan’s narrative choice of writing entire chapters of the novel in text message language or Power Point.

Yet the dilemma of the definition of identity reaches its peak in one of the final chapters of the book where Rebecca, an academic professor, is doing a research on what she has defined as “word castings”, groups of words devoid of meaning because of their excessive use on the Internet. Among these words with their lack of meaning produced by their usage on the Web is, of course, the word “identity.” The narrator explains, “Some (words) like ‘Identity’, ‘search’ and ‘cloud’, had clearly be drained of life by their Web usage. With others, the reasons were more complex; how had American become an ironic term?”<sup>24</sup> Considering this last statement as the example par excellence of the crisis of identity in American culture, Egan audaciously describes a voyage that depicts a changing culture moving toward a new definition of individualism.

In this literary voyage through evolving technologies and changing identities, we have seen how the gradual process of technological advancements eventually contributed to questioning and thus threatening the concept of identity in America, where the crisis of a national self may be more persistent than in any other country. To conclude this brief but broad analysis, as technology progresses and affects our daily lives, so does literature, reflecting society, characters, and their individualistic crisis over the lack of identity in a society re-defined by the incessant use of technology.

#### 4. Conclusion

This research has aimed to shed some light on the extensive and ongoing debate on identity in American society, eventually suggesting to us some of the tools necessary to analyze how American literature expanded this topic in its evolution with technology. This project wants to provide a different and, I hope, innovative perspective on one of the factors that challenge and shape American individualism, technological evolution. In the course of this project, we have seen how literature mirrors the American dilemma of cultural identity through novels that discuss this concept through technological advancements, creating characters whose identity is consistently compromised by a number of technological innovations, from earlier technologies to modern digitalization.

We initially examined the factors that question American Individualism such as the foundational myth and quest for a nationalistic creed, ethnicities, and the consequences of 9/11, in the attempt to explain the debatable nature of identity.

Consequently, we analyzed the first examples of technologies and their ability to endanger identity in novels such as *Wired Love* by Ella Cheever Thayer and Mark Twain’s *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court*. These first two case studies represent how identity-threat was connected to the usage of two of the first technological means, the telephone and the telegraph, in a performance of identities torn between reality and virtuality, past and present. We then shifted to the digital age and the quest for identity in David Foster Wallace, analyzing his attempt to narrate a system re-defined by New Media.

We ended by demonstrating how digital age expands the debate on identity in novels whose plots unfold illustrating our complicity and constant performance for technology.

In conclusion, we have demonstrated how by creating complicity with technologies we thus become active performers within multiple personalities. The crisis of identity is the natural consequence of our actions, constantly performing for technology. This project has attempted to broaden the scope on the debate of identity in America, thus providing a different perspective by looking at technology as one of the main controversies in the persistent dilemma on American individualism. The final aim of this research was to extend our conception of identity through the lens of the technologies that re-shape, extend and change our society, challenging the perception of our inner self.

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## ENDNOTES

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