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Introduction: Contemporaneity, the Digital, and the Experimental in the Writing of Jennifer Egan

VALERIE O'RIORDAN[©] AND ALICIA J. ROUVEROL

When Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2010) won the Pulitzer Prize, the National Book Critics' Circle Award, and the *LA Times* Book Prize in 2011, it catapulted Egan into the literary limelight. Hitherto, she had produced three novels and a short story collection, as well as numerous essays and journalistic articles; she received the Carroll Kowal Journalism Award in 2002 and served a term as President of PEN America, as well as serving also on the Authors Guild Council. Yet, despite this formidable record of achievement, and – as the essays in this special issue will demonstrate – the rich thematic and formal complexity of her oeuvre, Egan has largely been bypassed in scholarly research. Her writing stages a notable intervention into contemporary literature on both sides of the Atlantic, highlighting the ways in which literary experiment can break into mainstream markets, while simultaneously exploring contemporary political and economic discourses around neoliberalism, deindustrialization, and technological advancement. Despite this, critical discussion of contemporary fiction, particularly with regard to ideas around experiment, innovation, and politics, continues to center on her male contemporaries, including Michael Chabon, David Mitchell, and the other three “Daves”: David Foster Wallace, Dave Eggers, and David Peace (Mitchell 2).¹ As a woman writer, Egan's contribution is downplayed in contrast to the attention paid, for instance, to Ali Smith, Jeanette Winterson, and Kathy Acker.² While Birkbeck College hosted an international conference devoted to Egan's work in early 2014 (“Invisible Circus”), it was another seven years before the first full-length study of one of her texts (Ivan Kreilkamp's *A Visit from the Goon Squad Reread*) was published. Furthermore, with the key exception of our contributor Adam Kelly's 2011 analysis

¹ For a representative sample of works on Chabon, see Dewey; Meyers; Colbran. On D. Mitchell, see Dillon; O'Donnell; Childs and Green. On Wallace, see Boswell; Clare; McGowan and Brick; Hoffmann. On Eggers, see Galow; Hamilton; Hoffmann. On Peace, see Shaw, *David Peace: Texts and Contexts* and *Analysing David Peace*; O'Brien.

² For a representative sample of works on A. Smith, see Germanà and Horton; Kostkowska; Jelinková and Sumner. On Winterson, see Makinen; McAvan; Onega; Kostkowska. On Acker, see Borowska; Colby; Henderson.

of *Look at Me* (2001) as posing a significant response to postmodernity, extant writing on Egan's work has focused almost exclusively upon *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, the book that represented her popular breakthrough. What remains lacking, then, and what this special issue is intended to address, is a body of scholarly work tackling the breadth and complexity of Egan's collected works, a critical intervention that clarifies and concretizes Egan's position as a major contributor to twenty-first-century literature.

Previous Scholarship

Early studies of *A Visit from the Goon Squad* largely address that text's relationship to postmodernism, its representations and uses of music and technology, and, most notably, its engagement with experimental narrative strategies. While Arnaud Schmitt, for instance, claims that the "aesthetic oddity" of the so-called "PowerPoint chapter" in *A Visit from the Goon Squad* acts as a hermeneutic "meta-chapter" necessary in order for Egan's readers to "comprehend the fragmented narrative that [her] novel in its entirety unfolds" (75), Martin Moling suggests that this chronological fragmentation is linked to the book's thematic concern(s) with music, nostalgia, and the passage of time. Melissa J. Strong argues that the same anachronies that she conceived of in terms of Paul Tillich's theory of *kairos time* uncover "opportunities for wholeness and healing" in the text (471). Moving away from explicit concerns with narratology and form, John Masterson's examination of the post-9/11 context of Egan's work positions *A Visit from the Goon Squad* for the first time as a political intervention; Danica van de Velde investigates the book's representations of gender in terms of how Egan connects themes of nostalgia and authenticity with constructions of male and female identity; and David Cowart, examining *A Visit from the Goon Squad* in relation to the "epistemic vantage of [Egan's] second-generation postmodernism," suggests that the book offers us "multiple, contingent realities" (243) – thus harking back to Kelly's reading of *Look at Me*, which positions Egan as a post-postmodernist writer.

It was only from 2015 that Egan's wider list was given anything approaching equivalent consideration: in particular, her short story "Black Box" – originally serialized on Twitter and later printed in *The New Yorker* (2012) – became a key locus for subsequent critical attention, with much of this emerging scholarship focusing on the story's use of digital technology in relation to a growing scholarly interest in critical posthumanism. While Amelia Precup argues that the figure of the cyborg in "Black Box" enabled a critical exploration of the transition towards the "posthuman condition," Jennifer Gutman suggests that the "technological mediation of the self" described in the story (as concretized in its original format on Twitter) allows contemporary online readers to enter into "a reflexive relationship with their own modes of technological embodiment" (276). Again, other critics take a broader approach: Nie Bao-Yu categorizes the story as a key example of "digimodernism"

(821), and Daniel Aureliano Newman, evoking Masterson’s political contextualization of *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, describes “Black Box” as “a deceptively simple critique of post-9/11 American foreign policy as an extension of paternalism and patriarchy in the domestic sphere” (42). Latterly, critical writing on Egan has tended to focus on *Manhattan Beach* (2017), with a significant portion of vol. 134 of *PMLA* given over to that text; while Allan Hepburn turns to Lukács and Bakhtin in order to situate Egan’s historical novel at the juncture of epic and novel, much of the rest of the issue highlights the book’s representation of disability. Rachel Adams’ argument that *Manhattan Beach*’s thematic concern with siblings and disability becomes “an occasion for exploring the possibilities and limitations of genre” highlights the same authorial concern with formal and generic innovations previously noted in much of the critical response to *A Visit from the Goon Squad* and, in the mainstream press, to *The Keep* (366).

The attention paid to *Manhattan Beach* by *PMLA* is encouraging, but what this brief literature review illuminates most particularly are the gaps in this growing discourse: *The Invisible Circus* (1995), *Emerald City* (1996), *Look at Me*, and *The Keep* have been referenced only fleetingly in most of the existing scholarship on Egan, and yet these texts address not only the same key concerns as do *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, “Black Box,” and *Manhattan Beach* – namely, as the essays in this issue will suggest, contemporaneity and digital technology – but they also evince, like the later texts, Egan’s abiding investment in formal experimentation. While we have included here essays that concentrate specifically on *A Visit from the Goon Squad* and “Black Box,” it is our hope that the contextualization of these works alongside those of Egan’s less frequently referenced texts will allow for the emergence of a more balanced and thorough overview and critical consideration of her entire oeuvre.

Contemporaneity, the Digital, and the Experimental

In compiling this special issue, we were concerned not only with expanding the emerging critical discourse on Egan’s work to cover the breadth of her collected output but also with making explicit the critical reference points with which her work – and her critics – can be seen to be consistently engaged. As we see the concept of contemporaneity as being crucial to a critical understanding of Egan’s work, it is necessary, then, to clarify what we mean by both “the contemporary” and “contemporaneity.” Terry Smith argues that the former, as a simple descriptor, risks becoming a “vacuous [periodizing] placeholder,” and that “contemporaneity” might similarly be read as an empty signifier pointing merely towards “whatever it is that is occurring in all of the world right now”; he goes on to ask how such terms could possibly “match, let alone supplant, modernity and postmodernity as a descriptor of the state of things” (696). What, then, do these terms add to the critical conversation around recent literature? Smith’s answer is that “the contemporary” is a term rather more complex than this usage implies and that when periodizing

so-called “contemporary art,” we need to understand it as emerging out of “a world reshaped by rapid decolonization and incipient globalization” (696). That is, contemporary art is designated “contemporary” not because it is of the now, but because it is *fundamentally engaged with* “modelling the minutiae of the world’s processes” in an unstable present (697). It is in this engagement that the work’s “contemporaneity” can be located. Giorgio Agamben’s definition of “contemporaneity,” by contrast, is somewhat more broad: he sees it as that which entails “a singular relationship with one’s own time, which adheres to it and, at the same time, keeps a distance from it” (41). We suggest that Agamben’s “singular relationship” is manifested in Egan’s work in her texts’ grappling with the temporal complexities of their characters’ relationships to historicization and narrativization: her works engage thematically with the times in which they are set, while also offering critiques of both those times and these relationships.

Furthermore, taking our cue from Terry Smith’s rather more politicized definition, we want to highlight Egan’s concern with affect, transformation, (dis)location, and temporality in terms of how her work relates to and engages with societal transformation in an increasingly technologized world. This engagement is evidenced, for instance, in the cyborgian world of “Black Box,” in the hyperreality of the online world evoked in *Look at Me*, and in the avant-garde diving suit worn by Anna Kerrigan in *Manhattan Beach*. Moling and van de Velde have already noted the ways in which Egan’s characters in *A Visit from the Goon Squad* seek to orient themselves both in terms of their own embodied presents and of a rapidly changing technological landscape that manifests itself as a sharply felt nostalgia. It is our intention, then, in this issue to draw out more distinctly the significance of contemporaneity as a unifying theme in Egan’s work. We hope that by highlighting Egan’s engagement with masculinist technologized neoliberalism (“Black Box”); escalating international conflict (*Manhattan Beach*); asynchronous temporalities (*The Invisible Circus* and *A Visit from the Goon Squad*); and, with regard to *Look at Me*, the “radical disjunctures of perception [and] mismatching ways of seeing and valuing the same world” (Smith 703), this issue will highlight the overlaps and congruences in Egan’s work between her interests in the contemporary and in contemporaneity itself.

Much of what defines Egan’s work in terms of the contemporary is linked to what we are terming the experimental aspects of her work: discontinuities, anachronies, the conjunction of the formal and the political. Sarah Churchwell notes, in her review of *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, that the book “becomes more fragmented, and more formally experimental, as it progresses.” However, the degree to which Egan can be considered an “experimental” writer is itself worthy of consideration, given her widespread acclaim within the mainstream literary prize culture. We are mindful that “experiment” is a broad and slippery term: *The Routledge Companion to Experimental Literature*, for instance, defines “experimental literature” as comprising everything from “unfettered improvisation and the rigorous application of rules” to “being ‘born digital’ and being hand-made,” suggesting that it queries the limits and possibilities of literature,

laying “everything open to challenge, reconceptualization and reconfiguration” (Bray et al. 1). In the context of this issue, then, and with regard to Egan’s work, in particular, we take “experiment” to refer, flexibly, to a subversion of expected form and/or structure, a shifting relationship with and to genre and genre conventions, and an open-ended commitment to novelty and possibility. We suggest that Egan’s work, from the metafictional Gothic playfulness of *The Keep*, to the structural novelties of *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, positions her as representative of twenty-first-century fiction’s continuing interest in such problematizing of narrative form and genre.

This brings us to Egan’s relationship with postmodernity; as Kelly suggests, “Few among [her generation of post-boomer] writers have more directly addressed the task of responding to postmodernism and postmodernity than Jennifer Egan” (393). Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker note that “material events like climate change, financial crises, terror attacks, and digital revolutions” have implied the end of postmodernism even as, as Linda Hutcheon points out, “its discursive strategies and its ideological critique continue to live on” (181). Egan’s work – as the essays that follow will show – makes overt reference to such material events, while yet making canny use of the metafictional formal techniques we associate with postmodernism’s “strategies.” Her engagement with both contemporaneity and the contemporary, then, is evident in her works’ complex response to both postmodernism and its later developments and successors, whether we term these “metamodernism,” suggesting “an (often guarded) hopefulness” in tangent with “a markedly postmodern detachment” (Vermeulen and van den Akker); “altermodernism,” or an emergent modernism “reconfigured to an age of globalisation” and marked by the aim of exploring “all dimensions of the present” (Bourriaud 253, 257); or “post-postmodernism,” denoting an authorial desire to “reconnect with something beyond representation,” while still working within “a culture and aesthetic constructed by postmodernism” (McLaughlin 212). As this issue will demonstrate, Egan’s work encompasses both hope and critique, an abiding concern with a globalized world as facilitated by technology, and a playfulness in form that nonetheless gestures towards that which might underlie the merely aesthetic.

In This Issue

The contributors to this issue adopt a range of approaches in their analyses of Egan’s works, from David Hering’s argument that her treatment of music and the music industry in *A Visit from the Goon Squad* reaches “in the aftermath of postmodern temporal dislocation” towards “a model of durational contemporaneity” that might, as Agamben claims, allow us to better understand our own time; to Valerie O’Riordan’s suggestion that Egan’s critical deployment of posthumanism in “Black Box” opens up a textual space “in which a productive, revolutionary hybridity can be modelled.” Despite this heterogeneity of emphasis, however, the papers in this issue share certain common threads, particularly

around Egan's depictions of neoliberalism. It is worth noting here that four of the contributors (Adam Kelly, Katherine Johnston, Patricia Malone, and Emily Horton) focus explicitly on *Look at Me*. We highlighted above the problematic convergence of prior scholarship around *A Visit from the Goon Squad*; here, we argue that the emphasis on *Look at Me* in this issue suggests that Egan's third book can be read as a focal point around which particular key topics consolidate as loci of ongoing critical concern: namely, the troubling relationships between neoliberalism and, respectively, gender (Kelly), self-invention (Johnston), the "attention economy" (Malone), and an increasing concern with affect (Horton).

In "Jennifer Egan, New Sincerity, and the Genre Turn in Contemporary Fiction," Adam Kelly highlights a shift in literary ethos across Egan's career in the context of what he identifies as a wider sea-change in the American literary field, from the moment of literary "New Sincerity" in the 1990s to the "genre turn" in literary fiction since the early 2000s (Martin; Rosen "Literary Fiction" and *Minor Characters Have Their Day*). Kelly argues that Egan's work both illustrates the ways in which the New Sincerity laid the groundwork for this turn and allows us a better understanding of its aesthetic, economic, political, and gendered dimensions. His analysis of *Look at Me*, then, draws upon Rosalind Gill's recognition of the convergence "between the autonomous postfeminist subject and the psychological subject demanded by neoliberalism" (154), in order to spotlight Egan's depiction in that book of a particularly gendered neoliberal dystopia.

Mark West's study of *The Invisible Circus*, "Generation Jones, the Sixties, and *The Invisible Circus*," notes parallels between Egan's work and that of Lorrie Moore, Jonathan Franzen, and Jonathan Letham; he suggests that these writers' treatments of the 1960s reveal an understanding of history and the experience of temporality which both draws upon Jonathan Pontell's concept of "Generation Jones" and its "non-experience" of the sixties (Williams 95). West argues that in *The Invisible Circus* Egan utilizes the formal strategies of detective fiction to explore her generation's distinct relationship to the 1960s, which manifests for the novel's characters in a "Jonesian sense of missing out on history."

In "Look at (The New) Me: The Economic and Socio-Political Atmosphere of Image Culture," Katherine Johnston claims that, in *Look at Me*, Egan uses image culture and the notion of "self-invention" as a basis for unpacking the particular challenges of "neoliberal self-management" in a late-capitalist era. Considering the novel alongside Halle Butler's *The New Me* (2019), she contends that such reinvention is in fact a "faux expression" of American freedom, a consumer culture constructed in response to political disempowerment and economic hardship under neoliberalism – a context that is underscored by the novel's setting in postindustrial Rockford, Illinois – and "governed by capitalist, patriarchal forces."

Neoliberalism also serves as an entry point into Egan's work for Valerie O'Riordan, who, in "Calcified Morality and the New Heroism: Jennifer Egan's Monstrous Futures," argues that the stories "Pure Language" and "Black Box" each examine the impact of digital technology on morality in a post-9/11 political context.

In “Pure Language,” the digital handset represents, in Jeremy Gilbert’s terms, the technological materialism that enabled the expansion of neoliberalism (20), while also denoting a generation’s collective eschewal of individual moral responsibility. Recalling both Newman’s and Masterson’s political analyses of “Black Box,” O’Riordan draws attention to the particularly gendered role of the female cyborg in “Black Box”; here, we see not only the politicization of the female body, but also a challenge to the positioning of that female body in relation to the body politic, which is itself heavily figured as masculine.

In “‘What’s Real?’: Digital Technology and Negative Affect in Jennifer Egan’s *Look at Me* and *The Keep*,” Emily Horton departs from extant criticism that contextualizes Egan’s relationship with postmodernity as one bound up with aesthetics and temporal experiment (Schmitt, Moling, Cowart) by focusing instead on the role of feeling in Egan’s vision of the postmodern. Taking issue with Jameson’s claim that one of the constituent features of postmodernity is “the waning of affect” (10), and referring back to Kelly’s theorization of the New Sincerity, Horton concentrates on the negative affect frequently assigned to new media culture and technologies. With reference to Lauren Berlant’s theory of “cruel optimism” (1), Horton considers *Look at Me* as a scathing indictment of modern advertising and television, while finding in *The Keep* a reckoning with late capitalism, through an examination of the novel’s promotion of negative feeling as a response to the competitiveness and implicit violence inherent in capitalism.

David Hering, in “Play It Again: Reading the Contemporary through Music in Jennifer Egan’s *A Visit from the Goon Squad* and Dana Spiotta’s *Eat the Document*,” draws upon both of these novels in order to consider music as a productive way of problematizing postmodern approaches to both history and temporality. Whereas Moling argues that the “artistic project” of *A Visit from the Goon Squad* invokes “punk time” as a “means to access literature’s potential for slowing down time” (53), Hering posits that both Egan’s and Spiotta’s texts stage an intergenerational dialogue by contrasting the listening habits of parents and children and thus enable what Agamben calls a “meeting place” (52) between generations. In his examination of “the pause,” Hering suggests that the shared durational act of experiencing music can provide a clearer view of the past and of possible futures.

Patricia Malone, in “I Can See through You: Double Vision in Jennifer Egan’s *Look at Me* and Alexandra Kleeman’s *You Too Can Have a Body Like Mine*,” suggests that each of these novels interrogates the rise of immaterial economies and the attention economy – themselves industries which, Malone suggests, instantiate new modes of subjectification as part of a wider process of “feminization.” By foregrounding the “female experience,” these novels illustrate and reveal links between the logic of neoliberal rationalities, the construction and practice of gender, and the foundational figuration of “Americanness.”

In the issue’s concluding essay, “‘The Aesthetic of the Gap’: The Limits of Storytelling in the Work of Jennifer Egan,” Alicia Rouverol returns to the pause, suggesting that the structural gaps and lacunae that characterize *A Visit from the Goon*

Squad lead to what she calls an “aesthetic of the gap.” Both van de Velde and Moling explore the role of the gap in isolating themes pertaining to time, nostalgia, and punk music; but Rouverol argues that the gaps and resultant silences, also evident in *The Invisible Circus*, *Look at Me*, and *The Keep*, evince the limits of storytelling and dramatize the impossibility of a totalizing narrative. She contends that the experimental narratological structure of *A Visit from the Goon Squad* offers a new strategy – “Spiral Time” – whereby the novel’s ending, rather than denoting closure, suggests a spiraling outward, offering the possibility of new narratives and future worlds for Egan’s characters.

Finally, while the essays compiled in this special issue of *Contemporary Women’s Writing* directly and cumulatively explore Egan’s formal and thematic engagement with the intricacies of her, and our, increasingly technologized and politically fractious world, we hope more broadly that they will stimulate widespread critical understanding and acknowledgement of this previously undervalued writer, whose contributions to literary experiment have been recognized through public acclaim but not – to the same degree – via scholarly exploration. While, as Kaye Mitchell notes, “experimental,” “innovative,” and “avant-garde” have lately found their way back into critical discourse, *The Routledge Companion to Experimental Writing* devotes but a single chapter to women’s writing (1, 2), and Egan herself appears only parenthetically within that anthology (Bray et al. 251). The intention behind this special issue, then, is to spark just such critical conversation and to suggest to subsequent scholars a range of meaningful and productive ways in which Egan’s contribution to contemporary Anglophone literature might be further explored – particularly, but not exclusively, in the context of contemporary women’s writing.

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