

ARTICLE

## "Structural Dissatisfaction": Academics on Safari in the Novels of Jennifer Egan

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Jennifer Egan's acclaimed 2010 novel, *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, is a text populated by a disproportionately high number of, often unfulfilled, postgraduate researchers: "I'm in the PhD program at Berkeley", proclaims Mindy; "Joe, who hailed from Kenya [...] was getting his PhD in robotics at Columbia"; "Bix, who's black, is spending his nights in the electrical-engineering lab where he's doing his PhD research"; while only Rebecca "was an academic star". Indeed, in this text, academia seems a place of misery, of "harried academic slaving", and, ultimately, of "immaturity and disastrous choices".

Over the course of this article I will demonstrate that, in fact, Egan's critique of the university is an immanent meta-critique. While the history of the campus novel is often premised on hermetically sealing the campus (the genre usually functions through an explicit focus on a delineated campus space or, at least, predominantly upon the social milieu of the academy), Egan's novels seem to play on bursting the very notions of inside and outside that facilitate this genre, blurring the boundaries between fiction and critique; the leeching of the university into everyday life. She also, simultaneously, however, critiques the structures of labour upon which much of the academy is founded. While I will move towards Egan's latest novel, *A Visit From the Goon Squad*, throughout this article I will make reference to her entire novelistic canon, demonstrating that the treatment of academics throughout cannot be viewed as merely incidental, even if the appearances of such characters are sporadic and diffuse.

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Although it may be unwise to speak of the 'career' of a writer so evidently in full-flow as Jennifer Egan, it is nonetheless true that certain trends can already be seen over the arc of her writing since 1995. Whether the foremost of these areas is the emergence of new technologies and the way in which they shape our concepts of (re)mediation or in Egan's seemingly broader interest in the place of affect in experimental fiction will remain a topic for a scholarly debate that is only beginning to give Egan her due. It is also apparent, however, that certain institutions and spaces are given quantifiably more space within Egan's work than would be merited under strict societal mimesis and that, in line with a broader concern of postmodern fiction, one such space is the university. Indeed, from even Egan's earliest published fiction, her acclaimed *The Invisible Circus* (1994), it can be asserted that the academy plays a key role, even if that action remains offstage and invisible.

Satire of the university through fictional representation is, of course, hardly a new phenomenon.<sup>1</sup> Tom Sharpe's *Wilt* series springs to mind as representative of the furthest farcical end of a spectrum that includes Mary McCarthy's *The Groves of Academe* (1951), Kingsley Amis' *Lucky Jim* (1954), C.P. Snow's *The Masters* (1951), Dorothy L. Sayers' *Gaudy Night* (1935), Max Beerbohm's *Zuleika Dobson* (1911), and innumerable others. The importance of the study of the academy in fiction has significantly larger stakes, however, in American post-War writers, most frequently characterised through reference to Don DeLillo's *White Noise* (1985), John Barth's *Gilles Goat-Boy* (1966), Ishmael Reed's *Japanese by Spring* (1993) and several works by Philip Roth. As Adam Kelly notes, building on Mark McGurl's seminal *The Program Era*, "post-war American fiction is inseparable from its institutional contexts; [...] the academic context of the post-1960s English program, with its increasing incorporation of theory into the teaching of literature, may be just as materially relevant as the expansion of the creative

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<sup>1</sup> For just a selection of critical work on this subject, see Mortimer R. Proctor, *The English University Novel* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1957); John Lyons, *The College Novel in America* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1962); Ian Carter, *Ancient Cultures of Conceit: British University Fiction in the Post-War Years* (London: Routledge, 1990); Janice Rossen, *The University on Modern Fiction: When Power Is Academic* (London: Macmillan, 1993); Kenneth Womack, *Postwar Academic Fiction: Satire, Ethics, Community* (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002).

writing program during that period".<sup>2</sup> Indeed, Sean McCann makes a similar, compelling argument that much of what we term 'postmodern' fiction is concerned with destabilizing the indoctrinating educations of the academy: "At the heart of this fiction, in other words, is an implicit drama [. . .] in which the good writer evades the indoctrination associated with the university and other bureaucratic institutions". In McCann's reading, this accounts for many of the complexities of postmodern fiction; it becomes a legitimization strategy in which "Roth and the many writers who resemble him [. . .] assume that the only route past bureaucratic confinement of various sorts is to embrace a level of sophistication and expertise that enables them to trump the restrictions that detain more pedestrian minds". Ultimately, in this reactionary stance, although the university "epitomizes the worst features of a manufactured society", it "also becomes the indispensable launching pad for the effort to imagine one's way beyond its limits".<sup>3</sup>

With this context and periodisation in mind, Jennifer Egan's treatment of academic life should be viewed with some caution and most probably delineated from ideas of the traditional campus novel. It is equally apparent, however, that in this specific generic genealogy, the high-frequency of instances of the academy cannot be dismissed as an incidental detail. Over the course of this article I will demonstrate that, in fact, Egan's critique of the university is an immanent meta-critique. While the history of the campus novel is often premised on hermetically sealing the campus (the genre usually functions through an explicit focus on a delineated campus space or, at least, predominantly upon the social milieu of the academy), Egan's novels seem to play on bursting the very notions of inside and outside that facilitate this genre, blurring the boundaries between fiction and critique; the seeping of the university into everyday life. She also, simultaneously, however, critiques the structures of labour upon which much of the academy is founded. While I will move towards Egan's latest novel, *A Visit From the Goon Squad*, throughout this article I will make reference to her entire novelistic canon, demonstrating that the treatment

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<sup>2</sup> Adam Kelly, 'Beginning with Postmodernism', *Twentieth Century Literature*, 57 (2011), 391–422 (p. 396).

<sup>3</sup> Sean McCann, 'Training and Vision: Roth, DeLillo Banks, Peck, and the Postmodern Aesthetics of Vocation', *Twentieth Century Literature*, 53 (2007), 298–326 (p. 302).

of academics throughout cannot be viewed as merely incidental, even if the appearances of such characters are sporadic and diffuse.

### **Approach and Avoid: Jennifer Egan's pre-*Goon Squad* Academics**

In an anonymously penned 2010 exemplar of a utilitarian evaluation of higher education, *The Economist* noted several aspects that form a worthwhile context for this thematic study, despite the cynicism of the piece. Firstly, the author points out that in 2010 America produced 64,000 doctoral degrees, a figure that includes foreign students.<sup>4</sup> More tellingly, however, the 2010 US Census on educational attainment notes that only 1.2% of Americans hold a doctoral qualification, just over one in every hundred people.<sup>5</sup> This is of interest because, by any account, Egan's novels feature an unusually high proportion of Ph.D. Candidates ("grad students") that is certainly out of kilter with the number of completed doctoral degrees. As a second peripheral construct, *The Economist* piece correctly points out that "armies of low-paid Ph.D. researchers and postdocs boost universities', and therefore countries', research capacity". This is not limited to the United States. Indeed, a recent survey of higher education institutions in the UK revealed that universities and colleges are over twice as likely to use so-called 'zero-hours contracts' than other types of workplace, revealing that the 'life of the mind' is often precarious and balanced on a knife-edge.<sup>6</sup>

This sociological documentation is an important starting point for the depictions of academia in Egan's novels. Although it is not the intention here to demonstrate that Egan's mimesis of the academic environment is 'accurate', or at least not the sole intention, there is a more important critical function of her approach that

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<sup>4</sup> 'Doctoral Degrees: The Disposable Academic', *The Economist*, 18 December 2010 <<http://www.economist.com/node/17723223>> [accessed 6 September 2013].

<sup>5</sup> Camille L. Ryan and Julie Siebens, 'Educational Attainment in the United States: 2009. Population Characteristics. Current Population Reports. P20-566.', *US Census Bureau*, 2012, p. 6 <<http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED529755.pdf>> [accessed 6 September 2013].

<sup>6</sup> UCU, 'Over Half of Universities and Colleges Use Lecturers on Zero-Hour Contracts', 2013 <<http://www.ucu.org.uk/6749>> [accessed 6 September 2013].

requires this real-world backdrop for any purchase. Academics – taken here to mean those working (paid or unpaid) at universities ('the academy') in a research capacity (staff or research students) – have featured, at least peripherally, in all of Jennifer Egan's novels, with different functions. Given the fact that *A Visit from the Goon Squad* is not alone in dealing with this subject, it is first of all necessary to examine the background to academia that emerges from Egan's other novels: *The Invisible Circus* (1995), *Look at Me* (2001) and *The Keep* (2006).

Across her entire oeuvre, Egan's literary techniques for highlighting academia can be classified as postmodern.<sup>7</sup> In her first novel, *The Invisible Circus*, however, this primarily takes the form of "approach and avoid".<sup>8</sup> Be it the sixties, drug culture, free love, political radicalism or the inter-linked contexts of academia that are explored in this text, Egan pushes her core, informing, historical moments to the margins; they are an invisible circus. While these contexts are frequently referenced in passing, the text elects, at least on its surface narrative, to focus on personal tragedy and a quest for closure. The best individual instance of this is the student from the University of Turin, Pietro, whom Phoebe, the questing protagonist of *The Invisible Circus*, meets on the train to Reims while on her European quest to follow in her sister, Faith's, final, fatal footsteps.

The introduction of Pietro within this text is conducted under a complex system of overwriting and an intricate double-falsehood. The third-person narrator informs the reader that "He was Pietro, a student at the University of Turin", presumed to be relating the information that was given to Phoebe. Immediately after this, Phoebe responds to Pietro with an untruth: "Phoebe blithely explained that she was making her way toward Italy to meet her older sister. The lie came so effortlessly, bringing with it such a bolt of delight that she wondered why she ever told the truth." Because she has begun with a lie Phoebe is, naturally, suspicious of others and, in

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<sup>7</sup> A lineage that Egan herself explicitly acknowledged in a 2009 interview on *The Keep*. Here 'post-modernism' is primarily referring to the metafiction of the 1960s to 1980s. Charlie Reilly, 'An Interview with Jennifer Egan', *Contemporary Literature*, 50 (2009), 439–60 (p. 446) <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/cli.0.0074>>.

<sup>8</sup> A phrase here alluding to Thomas Pynchon's *V* (1963).

this case, questions Pietro: "You seem older than college" to which Pietro guiltily replies "Ah. Yes" before revealing that he is actually now beginning training as a Catholic missionary in Madrid. Although it is unclear as to whether Pietro's initial introduction is a deliberate falsehood or is simply the outcome of a complex series of inter-institutional arrangements, the structural progression here is the same: Pietro is introduced; Phoebe is introduced; Pietro's introduction is complicated/undone; Phoebe's introduction is complicated/undone.<sup>9</sup> This structure of promises and rewritten falsehoods is important for the political backdrop to *The Invisible Circus* and also for its representation of the university and students. Indeed, one of the key lines in the text pertaining to this neatly sums up the interrelation between history and forgotten utopian promises: "For all that surrounded her now was barely real. What about Faith? she would remind herself, walking the smudged halls or eating her lunch alone in the hospital-smelling cafeteria; what about the student strike of 1968? All that was forgotten."<sup>10</sup>

Most significantly for her next novel, *Look At Me*, in *The Invisible Circus* Egan seamlessly slides from the (invisible) student groups into the left-wing terrorism of the Baader-Meinhof gang:

Her articles were getting more and more radical—she was sympathetic to these student anarchist groups that were starting to use violence. [. . .] "Students?" Phoebe said. "Like my age?" [. . .] Anyhow, Ulrike Meinhof decides to do a TV play and asks Inge to be on the filming staff. [. . .] A couple of weeks later, early June, right about the time when I ran into Faith at Berkeley, this group issues a statement calling themselves the Rote Armee Fraktion.<sup>11</sup>

This is, of course, important given the role that terrorism plays in *Look At Me*, but is also of interest for the way in which the disgraced character, Moose Metcalf, an

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<sup>9</sup> Jennifer Egan, *The Invisible Circus* (London: Corsair, 2012), pp. 150–157.

<sup>10</sup> Egan, *The Invisible Circus*, pp. 72–73.

<sup>11</sup> Egan, *The Invisible Circus*, p. 231.

academic, is portrayed in that later text. Moose's position in this novel is that of an academic on the absolute fringe; his title of "Adjunct Assistant Adjunct Professor of History" is designed to "capture the vivid tenuousness" of his status within academe.<sup>12</sup> In his early twenties, Moose undergoes some form of claimed incommunicable experience of academic revelation pertaining to the horrors of modernity that he then makes it his life's work to confer. As Kelly points out, however, in keeping with its historicized moment, *Look at Me* is a novel that explicitly explores the discourses of high-Theory, with direct reference to Lacan at one stage, and it is in the character of Moose that this is most acutely focused, particularly with reference to various schools of antihumanist histories and his aversion to the reduction of experience to text and metaphor.<sup>13</sup> Moose is presented, however, as a totally dysfunctional character. He finds conversation difficult and prefers to avoid it where possible, a stance that sits paradoxically at odds with his desire to share his supra-linguistic vision.

Indeed, though, if Moose is the amiable side of dysfunctional academia, Egan does nonetheless also present a far darker type of academic in her subsequent novels. For instance, Phillippe, a "too old and insufficiently sleek" Frenchman, is working on a Ph.D. in media studies at NYU and represents, in this text, all that is wrong with academia.<sup>14</sup> Phillippe is interested in, as Marx would have it, interpreting the world, rather than changing it. Although he shares Moose's social awkwardness to a lesser degree – dropping his pen at a crucial moment<sup>15</sup> – he documents the meeting in which Charlotte consents to the grim project of PersonalSpaces, whose aim is to textualize existence for commercial benefit, but does not intervene with any suggestion that the project might be morally wrong. Even worse, Phillippe's interpretation will be biased; he makes "less of an effort to capture" Charlotte's remarks than those of Thomas and Victoria, presumably because, in addition to her non-exceptional post-accident visual appearance, he has pre-decided upon the theoretical content of his work and will shape reality to fit his textual ideal; exactly the same project undertaken

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<sup>12</sup> Jennifer Egan, *Look at Me* (London: Corsair, 2011), p. 134.

<sup>13</sup> Kelly, 'Beginning with Postmodernism', p. 410.

<sup>14</sup> Egan, *Look at Me*, pp. 241–242.

<sup>15</sup> Egan, *Look at Me*, p. 246.

by PersonalSpaces who wish to reduce reality to a sampled cross-section of the population.<sup>16</sup> In this light, *Look at Me* shows two pathological sides to academia: an isolated, nihilistic stagnation from Moose (connected perhaps to apocalypse and terror), who feels powerless to communicate his paralysing horror at post-industrial virtualisation and who feels joy only in the face of his disease spreading and an unreflexive participation with/complicity in an acceleration of this phenomenon from Phillippe.

If, in *Look at Me*, then, Egan spins out a vision of academics as either powerless to change, or complicit with, the rise of virtualised commodity forms that reduce reality to text – with many of the same overtures of Foucault's famous retort to Derrida<sup>17</sup> – her presentation of academia changes drastically in the period between 2002 and 2006. Indeed, Egan's twenty-first-century re-working of Calvino-esque gothic metafiction, *The Keep*, moves away from the juxtaposition of academia with terrorism and political marginality and instead shifts the critical focus to indentured systems of labour, predominantly through the representation of graduate students in that text. Egan's most explicitly metafictional work, the diegetic layering of *The Keep* is ingenious; the protagonist Danny is actually a character in a subsidiary intra-diegetic work of fiction created by Ray for a prison writing course. This layering, however, is fluid and there is a metaleptic violation of the discrete narrative when it is revealed that Mick is actually an autobiographical representation of Ray (Raymond Michael Dobbs),<sup>18</sup> the character who kills Danny. Meanwhile, the conclusion of *The Keep* leaves readers wondering how it is that the textual object has come to be produced since Holly, Ray's writing teacher, buried the manuscript in her backyard before leaving for Europe to find the, perhaps, real-world instantiation of the keep and its "imagination pool". These metafictional traits, metaleptic violations and impossible auto-textual objects are important because one would expect, given McCann's and Kelly's respective observations, to see the direct presence of Egan's academics

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<sup>16</sup> Egan, *Look at Me*, p. 248.

<sup>17</sup> Michel Foucault, 'My Body, This Paper, This Fire', in *History of Madness* (London: Routledge, 2006), pp. 550–74.

<sup>18</sup> Jennifer Egan, *The Keep* (London: Abacus, 2008), p. 217.



proportionately increase in a work so transparently indebted to the postmodern, Theory-inflected tradition.

This does not, however, seem to be the case; or at least not directly. In contrast to the extensive focus on Moose in *Look at Me*, fewer of the protagonists in *The Keep* are academics, although Holly is, of course, an instructor on a creative-writing programme, a fact that ties in well with Mark McGurl's observations on the significance of these programmes for post-boomer American fiction.<sup>19</sup> Instead, in this text we are shown a group of graduate students who are on-site to assist in the construction of Howard's alternative holiday destination.<sup>20</sup> The depiction here is interesting for its numerous contradictions: Howard's vision for the retreat is overwhelmingly weighted towards that of unquantifiable, un-textualised experience, imagination and purity, while he meanwhile happily uses the precarious and uncompensated labour of MBA graduate students to achieve his goal.<sup>21</sup> In many ways, this runs exactly in parallel to Moose in *Look At Me*: an attempt to articulate the fundamentally irreducible experience of art while also being situated within an exploitative and precarious labour situation. The fact also that the central symbol of this later text is a castle, or, in fact, a tower, a keep, should encourage speculation on the place of the ivory tower: the academy. After all, we can surely remember, as can a post-boomer theory generation of novelists, Foucault's famous rhetorical question to which we might only add 'universities': "Is it surprising that prisons resemble factories, schools, barracks, hospitals, which all resemble prisons?"<sup>22</sup>

The context in which the majority of the graduate students in this text appear – and also their narrative priority – is introduced through an innovative three-point list. Point 1 in this list introduces "Ann", Howard's wife, while point 3 introduces the

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<sup>19</sup> Kelly, 'Beginning with Postmodernism', p. 396; Mark McGurl, *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).

<sup>20</sup> There is also the character Nora, who jokingly claims to have written a Ph.D. on Mary Poppins. Egan, *The Keep*, p. 72.

<sup>21</sup> Although one cannot help but feel that Egan's point might have been more sharply made through the use of humanities graduate students.

<sup>22</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. by Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1997), p. 228.

eventual narrator, Mick, her ex-lover. Point 2 in this list, hinged between two essential characters for the plot are the graduate students. They are not, however, introduced as students at first but rather as "workers" who are "churned" through swinging doors, as they are churned through their utilitarian postgraduate degrees, studying MBAs at Illinois or hotel management at Cornell.<sup>23</sup> The irony here, of course, is that "Howard's renovation was their summer project" meaning that "they were doing this for credit", once more demonstrating the systems of precarity that are intrinsic to the type of utilitarian business activities for which they are being trained (Howard was, after all, a bond trader).<sup>24</sup> If, in this instance, the students of business 'get what they deserve' – by which I mean that in being trained for utilitarian business, they are used in a utilitarian fashion – then there are even graver repercussions, on the academic front, in the representation of Danny in this novel.

Although Danny appears as the narrator of the novel until the end, he is, diegetically speaking, simply a creation of Ray/Mick, whose backstory, thoughts and feelings are created as part of a creative-writing programme. Curiously, though, despite Holly's actual lack of formal training as a writing instructor, Ray's creation (i.e. the intra-diegetic Danny narrative of *The Keep*) spurns a realist mode. Characters' speech is indicated, for instance, in the fashion of scripted drama: "Danny: Nothing happened".<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, the narrative voice that Ray uses owes a great deal to the style and manner of John Fowles, among others. This is most evident in the moments where the text forks in the fashion of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969) and elements of narrative indeterminacy are introduced, such as when Danny posits two separate answers to the question of whether his night excursion – including his sexual involvement with the centenarian baroness – was a dream or reality.<sup>26</sup>

This digression from the attempted realist mode of which one would expect amateur storytellers to partake in the American novelistic tradition – the affected naivety of, say, Willa Cather's Jim Burden in *My Ántonia* (1918) who claims not to

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<sup>23</sup> Egan, *The Keep*, p. 21.

<sup>24</sup> Egan, *The Keep*, p. 21.

<sup>25</sup> Egan, *The Keep*, p. 156.

<sup>26</sup> Egan, *The Keep*, p. 156.

"arrange or rearrange" but to "simply wr[i]te down" with the supposition (falsely in that case) that it "has n't any form"<sup>27</sup> – might lead the reader to suspect that Ray is simply a further diegetic layer, a fantasy invention of Holly to escape the crystal-meth-infused lifestyle that she shares with her partner. Conversely, it may instead open up a space in which to think about different forms of knowledge production. Coupled with the critique of utilitarian higher education implicit in the earlier jibes at the MBA students, the narrator is keen to claim, early in the text, that "all the things Danny had achieved in his life – the alto, the connections, the access to power, the knowing how to get a cab in a rainstorm, and the mechanics of bribing Maître d's, and where to find good shoes in the outer boroughs" amounted to "the equivalent of a PhD, all the stuff Danny knew".<sup>28</sup> This "university of life" approach, however, appears, in retrospect, as an affected compensation by Ray for his own lack of formal education and, now, incarceration. This is evident in the fact that Ray's character, Danny, is deliberately infantilised. He is, for instance, "terrified" of the fact that he must be an adult, terrified by "the girls especially, with their black bras and purses stocked with multi-colored condoms and exact ideas of what they liked in bed. It terrified him because if these were adults then he must be, too".<sup>29</sup> Yet, we are also led to believe that this figure, terrified of young adult women, terrified of his own maturation and responsibilities, has (at least in his own egotistic mind, as written by Ray) the "equivalent of a PhD".

The narrative voice here is incredibly difficult to place and, at this depth of layering, it becomes almost impossible to nail down a definitive critique of the represented object; each diegetic layer brings a fresh stance. It is therefore only possible to analyse the function of the layering in relation to the object of representation through a permutation of the stances, many of which are *sous rature*. From the perspective of Danny's narrative, the supposed 'street'-equivalence of his knowledge is surely a sign of self-reassurance against his own Delphic self-knowledge of his true

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<sup>27</sup> Willa Cather, *My Ántonia*, Dover Thrift Editions (New York: Dover, 1994), p. 3.

<sup>28</sup> Egan, *The Keep*, p. 33.

<sup>29</sup> Egan, *The Keep*, p. 28.

inadequacy. At Ray's narrative level, there is a desire to both infantilise Danny and at the same time to cast him as an unsympathetic character (as despite his assurances that he "liked Danny"<sup>30</sup> he did, nonetheless, shoot him). In doing so, a doctoral qualification is denigrated; brought down to Danny's level. In turn, this serves twofold to position Danny as, firstly, an insecure individual who falsely reassures himself and, secondly, to allow Ray to swipe at formal education. On the other hand, if we are to take Holly as a writer of Ray's story – she does, after all, possess the manuscript – then the contrasting inflection between Ray and Danny serves to endear Ray at Danny's expense. Danny is, in this mode, a cleverly crafted creation of Ray, designed to evoke the specific caricature presented in the first mode, thereby showing Ray's ability to thrive and create without higher education. Where Egan's own voice sits here is debatable and probably impossible to place, but it is indisputable that the status of the academy is complex and layered within *The Keep*, despite the appearance, at first glance, of a retreat from the subtlety of *Look At Me*.

This diegetic layering, linked to ontological instability and dreams, often forms a context for novels that deal with the academy, most likely for the historical reasons posited by McGurl and seen in other texts such as Percival Everett's *Erasure* (2001). This aside, I will now move to consider Egan's most recent work, *A Visit from the Goon Squad*. This text is curiously placed because it is unclear whether it is a series of (extremely) loosely interconnected short stories or a "novel", howsoever the historical permutations on that term are taken.<sup>31</sup> In some senses, then, this latest work represents the most extreme form of layering yet encountered in Egan's work. Interestingly, it also represents an extension and modification of her treatment of academia.

### Theories from the Goon Squad

In terms of its most obvious themes, *A Visit from the Goon Squad* does not make much effort to hide its hand. As the text explains its own title in terms of an entropic descent, in combination with its Proustian epigraph, we are told: "You don't look

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<sup>30</sup> Egan, *The Keep*, p. 209.

<sup>31</sup> If, that is, 'the novel' can even be taken as a homogeneous category. Franco Moretti, *Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for Literary History* (London; New York: Verso, 2007), p. 30.

good anymore twenty years later, especially when you've had half your guts removed. Time's a goon, right?"<sup>32</sup> As well as spanning a large chronological and geographical range, the text is, however, also extremely formally playful with an entire segment of the narrative conveyed through a series of Powerpoint-style presentation slides, as just one instance.<sup>33</sup> As would be expected by the trajectory that I have been tracing here, the text is also one saturated by academia.

Indeed, *Goon Squad* is a novel populated by a disproportionately high number of, often unfulfilled, postgraduate researchers: "I'm in the PhD program at Berkeley", proclaims Mindy;<sup>34</sup> "Joe, who hailed from Kenya [. . .] was getting his PhD in robotics at Columbia";<sup>35</sup> "Bix, who's black, is spending his nights in the electrical-engineering lab where he's doing his PhD research";<sup>36</sup> while only Rebecca "was an academic star".<sup>37</sup> Indeed, in this text, academia seems a place of misery, of "harried academic slaving to finish a book while teaching two courses and chairing several committees",<sup>38</sup> and, ultimately, a seeming outcome of "immaturity and disastrous choices".<sup>39</sup>

While these figures are scattered throughout the entire text – and Egan seems to deliberately push them to the margins, continuing the approach and avoid style of *The Invisible Circus* – the most protracted point of focus comes in chapter four: "Safari". This was not originally the case. In an early draft of the novel, Egan had written in an academic figure to comment on the "Great Rock and Roll Pauses" section, a fact that she revealed at the Q&A session of the first international conference held on her work.<sup>40</sup> Had this remained, the role of academia in this novel might have been

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<sup>32</sup> Jennifer Egan, *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (London: Corsair, 2011), p. 134.

<sup>33</sup> Egan, *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, pp. 242–316.

<sup>34</sup> Egan, *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, p. 67.

<sup>35</sup> Egan, *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, p. 346.

<sup>36</sup> Egan, *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, p. 194.

<sup>37</sup> Egan, *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, p. 331.

<sup>38</sup> Egan, *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, p. 331.

<sup>39</sup> Egan, *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, p. 86.

<sup>40</sup> Organised by Zara Dinnen, this event was held at Birkbeck, University of London in April 2014 and was called *The Invisible Circus*. Egan graciously attended the event, listening to an entire day of academic papers on her own work, including the draft that became this paper.

very different. As it is, though, this did not come to fruition and "Safari" remains the high-point for institutional mimesis in the text. This chapter of Egan's novel was originally published in *The New Yorker* as a standalone story, thereby demonstrating the discrete nature of *Goon Squad's* components.<sup>41</sup>

The presentation of academia in this chapter is centred on Mindy, the "twenty-three-year-old girlfriend" of Lou, "a powerful male".<sup>42</sup> Mindy is an anthropology candidate at Berkeley whose disciplinary grounding is founded upon Claude Lévi-Strauss's structuralism, which she hopes to move beyond and refine, rather than simply "rehash". This explains the rationale for her identity presentation in terms of being a girlfriend; despite its anti-feminist connotations, Egan's character inherently thinks in structuralist terms. Indeed, her central theorisation rests upon "the link between social structure and emotional response",<sup>43</sup> a thought process that in turn orbits around her claimed concepts of "Structural Resentment", "Structural Affection", "Structural Incompatibility", "Structural Desire", "Structural Fixation" and "Structural Dissatisfaction".<sup>44</sup> These terminological components, in addition to satirising various forms of academic discourse, also form a more complex tapestry that interlinks with other portions of *Goon Squad's* narrative.

As with much of Egan's novel, *Goon Squad* also tells us much about its content through its formal conceits. While the most striking of these is the Powerpoint-style presentation of "Great Rock and Roll Pauses", there are several structural features of "Safari" that are also congruent with its intra-diegetic content. The first of these aspects is that the chapter is grouped beneath headings that pertain to place: "Grass", "Hills" and "Sand". The spatial nature of these headings serves to mirror the broader divisional structure of the short-story cycle that *Goon Squad* deploys. The fact that

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<sup>41</sup> Jennifer Egan, 'Safari', *The New Yorker*, 11 January 2010 <[http://www.newyorker.com/fiction/features/2010/01/11/100111fi\\_fiction\\_egan?currentPage=all](http://www.newyorker.com/fiction/features/2010/01/11/100111fi_fiction_egan?currentPage=all)> [accessed 3 October 2013].

<sup>42</sup> Egan, *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, p. 67.

<sup>43</sup> Egan, *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, p. 67.

<sup>44</sup> Egan, *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, pp. 68–69, 85.

these headings are related to outdoor spaces, however, seems also to contain an implicit critique of anthropological fieldwork. In turn, this aspect has, itself, meta-textual connotations for the Theory-conscious reader who is venturing into (and critically reading) a quasi-delineated fictional space as though he or she were an outsider.<sup>45</sup>

Remaining within "Safari", it is worth extrapolating a few of the remarks that form Mindy's "structural" social phenomena as they reveal the mechanisms through which academic anthropology is satirised here. The first point to note is that "Structural Resentment" and "Structural Affection", as defined by Mindy, are heavily infused with psychoanalytic tropes. In Structural Resentment, "the adolescent daughter", we are told, "will be unable to tolerate the presence of [her father's] new girlfriend" and will use her "own nascent sexuality" to "distract him from said girlfriend's presence".<sup>46</sup> Several schools of psychoanalytical thought seem to fit this mould. In the first instance, Jung's proposition of an Electra complex springs to mind, although the refinement made here to the age range (3–6 years) for the phallic stage in which the complex is supposed to occur makes a direct mapping difficult. This Freudian/Jungian approach is also present in "Structural Affection" where the "pre-adolescent son" has not "yet learned to separate his father's loves and desires from his own", the complimentary Oedipus complex.<sup>47</sup> Perhaps another avenue for exploration is the focus here on the "powerful male" aspect, thus bringing structural anthropology into closer contact with Karen Horney's revisions to Freudian analysis, particularly as it relates to women and social-structural envy of power, rather than anatomy. Indeed, further exploration might find interest in Horney's essay "The Genesis of the Castration Complex" with the strong "emphasis Horney places in it on the father-daughter [sexual] relationship".<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> I owe the remarks in this paragraph to an anonymous reviewer.

<sup>46</sup> Egan, *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, p. 68.

<sup>47</sup> Egan, *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, p. 68.

<sup>48</sup> Bernard J. Paris, *Karen Horney: A Psychoanalyst's Search for Self-Understanding* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994), p. 69.

While this could be a reflection upon the interdisciplinary approaches of psychological and psychoanalytic anthropology, it also points to another target site: literary studies. As Peter Osborne notes, fields as diverse as the "'textuality' of a general semiotics, the 'discourses' of a Foucauldian historicism or the 'topography' of a Lacanian metapsychology" enjoyed a period of remarkable academic hegemony under the label of 'T/theory' "largely via [their] occupation of the institutional space of literary criticism, in conjunction with an aspiration to social criticism".<sup>49</sup> The conjoined depictions here of psychoanalysis and structuralism with that of anthropology (a discipline of social observation, classification and criticism) within a work of literary fiction that will, itself, knowingly be subjected to literary-critical reading practices, results in a work that has two functions.

The first identifiable function here is to once more situate Egan's work in the realm of metafiction. Although deeply encoded, the mimetic aspiration in "Safari" is directed towards the highly interdisciplinary area of literary studies itself; a knowing wink to the academic readers of her works who are being satirised while they read. Indeed, even Mindy's remarks on her own structural placement serve a critical-reflexive function, in this instance undertaken upon a literary character amid the whirl of fields that constitute the reaction against English's integration of cultural studies against Leavis. The second function of this initial setup is to characterise literary studies in a New Historicist and/or Cultural Materialist vein. This comes about twofold because of the character name, "Chronos", with his emphasis (as per the remainder of *Goon Squad*) on "time" and its interaction with literary texts but also because of the focus that Mindy places upon power-relations through structural inter-connection in her own readings of societal situations.

Observations of this type contribute to a discussion of metafiction. One of the old refrains of scholarship that criticises metafiction is the allegation that the form only looks inward, preferring to focus upon literature and its own tropes and study. This type of thinking, coupled with a counter-ironic reflex, led to David Foster

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<sup>49</sup> Peter Osborne, 'Philosophy after Theory: Transdisciplinarity and the New', in *Theory after Theory*, ed. by Jane Elliott and Derek Attridge (New York: Routledge, 2011), pp. 19–34 (pp. 19–21).



Wallace's tracts against irony, including the most well-known "E Unibus Pluram" (in turn generating a focus on a "new sincerity").<sup>50</sup> It seems, in the case of Egan, however, to have generated a different type of response. As with Moose's longing to communicate his experience of a non-textualised reality in *Look At Me* – a "reality hunger" as David Shields might have it in his book of that name – in *A Visit from the Goon Squad* and especially in "Safari", the inward focus reveals a mode of textual literary studies that carries an "aspiration to social criticism", as Osborne put it. This bi-directional relationship with reality is the solution that Egan's metafiction poses to the historical conjunction of T/theory's passing and metafiction's retreat to political inefficacy. Egan here gives a vision that looks inwards so as to avoid a naïve realism (the problematisation to which the first generation of metafiction responded) while ensuring that the mode in which it casts itself is one that looks outwards (New Historicist/Cultural Materialist). This is not, however, without irony and, as might be expected, generates a fresh field of problematisation upon which multiple areas of practice collide.

To demonstrate this aspect, consider a few further examples that illustrate that the conjunction of multiple theoretical aspects is an integral part of "Safari". For instance, when Chronos leaves the jeep to closely observe the lion (in a show of competitive bravado that Mindy labels "*Structural Fixation*: A collective, contextually induced obsession that becomes a temporary locus of greed, competition, and envy"<sup>51</sup>) it is in the spirit of Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, wherein "Myth is already enlightenment, and enlightenment reverts to mythology".<sup>52</sup> This is because, as Chronos comes to directly approach nature, his cocksure positivist attitude (in which man's inevitable progress must supposedly come from a mastery of nature) results in an abrupt alienation from that very nature. As the lion "vaults

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<sup>50</sup> Adam Kelly, 'David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction', in *Consider David Foster Wallace*, ed. by David Hering, Amazon Kindle edition (Los Angeles, CA and Austin, TX: SSMG Press, 2010), pp. 131–46.

<sup>51</sup> Egan, *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, p. 69.

<sup>52</sup> Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, ed. by Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. by Edmund Jephcott (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), p. xvii.

at Chronos in an agile, gravity-defying spring" the regression is enacted as Albert kills the lion "with a rifle he'd secreted somewhere".<sup>53</sup> In addition to the innocence of Rolph, who "just [likes] watching" the animals, instead of killing them, this assault on positivist assurance also seems to come out in the indictment of colonial practice that is inherent in the safari expedition.<sup>54</sup> Albert, the character who permits the reckless venture and eventually destroys the natural phenomenon whose observation he is supposed to merely facilitate, is described as a "surly Englishman" with "longish brown hair and mustache", looking, in the child Rolph's eyes "like a real explorer",<sup>55</sup> as opposed to the feared "black men" from whom Lou earlier wants to "yank" Charlie away.<sup>56</sup> Moreover, Albert's mother, who comes from "back in Minehead" (implying that this ethnically un-diverse area of rural England is Albert's point of origin, with a 95.8% white population according to the 2011 census)<sup>57</sup> foresees this "latest in a series" of white enlightenment "failures"; she decries his "self-destructive tendencies".<sup>58</sup>

This leads to an entanglement of postcolonial aspects. Indeed, this is a scenario in which the white man is said to look like a "real explorer" and in which the innocent, but perversely societally conditioned, child holds the view that Africa should be full of white "explorers". At the same time, this dialectic of enlightenment leads to a white alienation from nature that is joined by the many feminist critiques that inhere within this section. Indeed, it is clear that Lou here uses Mindy as a competitive mediation between himself and other men, being a "man who cannot tolerate defeat",<sup>59</sup> thereby echoing the sentiments of Pynchon's Lake Traverse in *Against the Day* (2006), who asks Deuce Kindred and Sloat Fresno whether they might "just

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<sup>53</sup> Egan, *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, p. 73.

<sup>54</sup> Egan, *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, p. 81.

<sup>55</sup> Egan, *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, pp. 67, 78.

<sup>56</sup> Egan, *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, p. 64.

<sup>57</sup> Office for National Statistics, '2011 Census', 2012 <<http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/census/2011-census/key-statistics-for-local-authorities-in-england-and-wales/index.html>> [accessed 8 October 2013].

<sup>58</sup> Egan, *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, p. 74.

<sup>59</sup> Egan, *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, p. 83.

leave me out of it and do each other for a change", recognising herself in exactly the same role as *Goon Squad's* Mindy.<sup>60</sup> Indeed, if, for Lou, women are simply objects of exchange and mediation, used by men, this takes the form of his metonymic objectifying pronouncement that "Women are cunts", a phrase that Rolph finds himself unable to repeat.<sup>61</sup> Although Rolph is not exempt from this trafficking economy – in an extremely psychoanalytic move, it becomes apparent that he had an affair with his father's girlfriend, Jocelyn, who shared his exact birthday<sup>62</sup> – he is presented as damaged by the patriarchal effects of this setup. In a proleptic temporal distortion similar to Frobisher in David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* (2004), who writes in his own diary of how he "Shot myself through the roof of my mouth at [the upcoming] 5 a.m.",<sup>63</sup> it is revealed at the end of "Safari" that this moment, the two children dancing, will be a memory that Charlie "will return to again and again, for the rest of her life, long after Rolph has shot himself in the head in their father's house at twenty-eight".<sup>64</sup> As noted, Rolph is not excluded from the patriarchal system, but he is described as a "gentle boy"<sup>65</sup> and is among the most hurt by such a system, as is made clear by the fact that he kills himself "in their father's house", an aspect that is seemingly accurately mimetic according to the figures of the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, which show that 78.9% of those who died by suicide in 2010 were male.<sup>66</sup>

This proleptic leap at the end of the "Safari" section brings the sub-text back full-circle to its initial anthropological critique. We are told, early in the text, that Mindy "hasn't cracked her Boas or Malinowski". Indeed, it would be remiss not to remark upon the fact that she is a terrible anthropologist. Her neglect of these core texts is an ironic joke, since Boas and Malinowski were invested, through such concepts as "participatory observation," in exploring how the presence of the anthropologist – the

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<sup>60</sup> Thomas Pynchon, *Against the Day* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2006), p. 303.

<sup>61</sup> Egan, *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, p. 82.

<sup>62</sup> Egan, *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, pp. 93–94.

<sup>63</sup> David Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas* (Sceptre, 2008), p. 487.

<sup>64</sup> Egan, *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, p. 87.

<sup>65</sup> Egan, *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, p. 90.

<sup>66</sup> American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, 'Facts and Figures' <<http://www.afsp.org/understanding-suicide/facts-and-figures>> [accessed 9 October 2013].

observer – shapes discourse (participant observation). In "Safari", Mindy is simplistically overlaying a theoretical framework – structuralism – onto her reality in a way that creates a falsified detachment from that reality. Had she "cracked" her Boas and Malinowski, she might have seen this. Although this forms another piece of the novel's anti-Theory discourse, once again the ironic joke rebounds upon the reader, for it is only at the moment of dislocation from the main temporal setting of the text that the empathic and affective elements of the work come to the fore. Indeed, a reader who has been viewing "Safari" cynically as pure parody can be shocked by distancing; the change of perspective that highlights our own participatory observation of Egan's anthropological story spaces, spaces that are never quite as disconnected and isolated as we might think, reflected in Egan's short-story/novel form crossover.

In this way, *A Visit from the Goon Squad* begins to do something different and interesting with the range of theoretical tropes that it deploys within its fictional bounds. It remains the case that Mindy's range of "structural" phenomenon are pretentious and are here used to satirise academia. The way in which this satire plays out, though, is not the same as in other parodies, such as Everett's take on Barthes's *S/Z* (1970) in *Erasure*. For one thing, although Egan's character is perhaps obscuring, rather than clarifying, reality with her complex terminologies, her observations do turn out to be fairly accurate within the narrative. Furthermore, the theoretical paradigms of postcolonialism, psychoanalysis, anthropology, the dialectic of enlightenment and feminism – which could, in some ways, be said to be the touchstones of contemporary (or at least passing/recent/high-Theory era) university English – are hardly subjected to ridicule at all in Egan's novel. In fact, they form the core of the chapter's pathos in "Safari". Rolph's suicide is directly linked to the patriarchal environment, with its masculine destruction of nature, which feeds back into the episode's eponymous, analeptic episode. In other words: yes, of course, Egan's academics are there for ridicule, but that is not all. The text still needs, as does most contemporary fiction with any kind of political mimesis or ethical intent, to legitimate itself against the discourses of the academy. At the same time, though, Egan's text seems to claim ownership of this discourse for itself and demonstrate its superior ability to weave plausible cause and effect – and affect – into theory.

## Conclusions: From *Before* to *After*

One of the most striking aspects of *Goon Squad's* deployment of theoretical tropes, in conjunction with the continued depiction of precarious academic labour that was so prevalent in *The Keep*, is that its (T/theory's) moment is past. Given that I have been arguing that the effect of this combination of representations (diverse modes of T/theory, academic precarity) within a work of fiction is to represent the academic discipline of English itself, and specifically a New Historicism and/or Cultural Materialism of the present, what picture does *Goon Squad* paint for the future of this field of endeavour in the wake of T/theory's passing? Firstly, academia and English seem, in some ways, to have met their own squads of goons. The flow of linear time that sits so centrally to what some optimistically call late capitalism has demonstrated the inability of the Leftist, committed stances of Cultural Materialism to effect revolutionary change.<sup>67</sup> *The Invisible Circus*, for this reason, keeps its academics out of sight. As Egan's depiction of '68 charts the rise and then fall of the Left's hope, the figures of the academy who failed to change the world are marginalised in a retrospective act of textual-economic punishment. As Adorno then puts it, referencing Marx's famous statement on the purpose of philosophy: "philosophy lives on because the moment of its realisation was missed".<sup>68</sup> As Adorno notes, though, "This is why theory is legitimate and why it is hated: without it, there would be no changing the practice that constantly calls for change", a fact that Egan's text also seems to acknowledge.<sup>69</sup> That Egan's academics become ever more prominent as their ability to effect change proportionately decreases, however, says much about Egan's indebtedness to postmodern stylistics. Secondly, the depiction of academia in Egan's trajectory is one of critique of politics in her first novel, through to a critique of precarious labour in *The Keep*, until in *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, it becomes possible to see the academics, especially through Mindy in "Safari", as enmeshed in many of the book's major themes: feminism, politics, metafiction and academia itself. Egan's novels are not *about* academics.

<sup>67</sup> With apologies to Nick Cohen for borrowing his formula of "What Optimists Call Late Capitalism" in Nick Cohen, *Cruel Britannia: Reports on the Sinister and the Preposterous* (London: Verso, 2000), p. 26.

<sup>68</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. by E.B. Ashton (London: Routledge, 1973), p. 5.

<sup>69</sup> Adorno, p. 142.

They do, though, universally focus more heavily on the academy than would be necessary if strictly representing society. In this way, perhaps, Egan betrays, perhaps, not an anxiety of influence but what we might term an anxiety of academia.

### **Conflict of interest statement**

The author of this piece is a Founder and Director of the Open Library of Humanities. Peer review was handled by a third-party editor and conducted on a double-blind basis.

### **Competing Interests**

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

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