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Article:

White, C orcid.org/0000-0003-3338-6010 (2022) '*Deskless, commuteless, and theoretically omnipresent*': work, global violence, and capitalist realism in Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad*. *Textual Practice*, 36 (9). pp. 1481-1499. ISSN 0950-236X

<https://doi.org/10.1080/0950236x.2021.1971748>

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‘Deskless, commuteless, and theoretically omnipresent’: work, global violence, and capitalist realism in Jennifer Egan’s *A Visit from the Goon Squad*

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Word count: 8113

‘Deskless, commuteless, and theoretically omnipresent’: work, global violence, and capitalist realism in Jennifer Egan’s *A Visit from the Goon Squad*

This essay examines how, through narrating the white-collar workplace, Jennifer Egan’s *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2010) engages with structural concerns of contemporary capitalism, global violence, postcolonial oppression, and contemporary technologies as a text written in the wake of the 2007/8 financial crisis. Alongside these concerns and through reading two chapters of Egan’s novel, ‘Selling the General’ and ‘Pure Language’, this article also examines how fictional representation more broadly operates as both an aesthetic mode and as an active component of a political-economic sensibility that is necessary to upholding the capitalist status quo in the contemporary moment: this is, as Mark Fisher describes, capitalist realism. By bringing these critical strands in dialogue with one another, not only does this enable a nuanced reading of how the novel understands and charts the relations between these structural concerns, but it also facilitates a furthering of capitalist realism as a critical framework.

Keywords: Jennifer Egan; *A Visit from the Goon Squad*; work; global violence; capitalist realism; neoliberalism

‘Time’s a goon, right?’ says record label executive Bennie Salazar to ageing slide guitarist Scotty Hausmann in the final chapter of Jennifer Egan’s *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2010), ‘You gonna let that goon push you around?’¹ It is the early 2020s, and Scotty is refusing to play a packed-out concert at Ground Zero; he is too scared, too old, too time-worn. Over the novel’s non-linear chronology Scotty has gone from teenage garage band member to school janitor and now to prospective rock star, his hobbies and occupation never being fully in his control, always in service to someone else. But Bennie is a manager under pressure: his own position as a record executive demands that he gets Scotty to play at all costs. What initially seems like a simple question from Bennie

designed to motivate Scotty is in fact much more complex. How has time, rendered as a goon, become violent? Where does this violence originate? How does this violence manifest: as economically destructive, socially destructive, or both? Can the individual do anything but let that goon push them around?

This article examines how, through narrating the white-collar workplace in two of its chapters in particular, ‘Selling the General’ and ‘Pure Language’, *Goon Squad* engages with structural concerns of contemporary capitalism, global violence, postcolonial oppression, and contemporary technologies. Alongside these, it examines how fictional representation more broadly operates as both an aesthetic mode and as an active component of a political-economic sensibility that is necessary to upholding the capitalist status quo in the contemporary moment: this is, as Mark Fisher describes, capitalist realism. I chart this first by reading *Goon Squad*’s white-collar freelancers as exemplary of capitalist realism in Fisher’s sense. I then read the novel’s representation of global violence as intrinsic to American capitalist survival as central to its narrative method, one which simultaneously critiques the mechanisms of capitalism and demonstrates an awareness that it too is implicated within them. By bringing these critical strands in dialogue with one another, not only does this enable a nuanced reading of how the novel understands and charts the relations between these structural concerns, but it also facilitates a furthering of capitalist realism as a critical framework. One of the limits of capitalist realism —as it is currently conceived—is in its tendency to homogenise economic subjects, failing to adequately take into account how social differences, in particular race and gender, are embroiled in the active construction of a neoliberal status quo. As such, I argue that the realist mode of *Goon Squad*, in particular the ways in which it narrates and represents the American freelance worker as part of a global capitalist system, produces a genealogy of capitalist exploitation across generations such that the

central defining characteristic of capitalist realism (that realist representation *produces* capitalist reality) must necessarily consider social position as inherent to production as well as representation.

Fisher describes capitalist realism as ‘the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to *imagine* a coherent alternative to it’.² It logically follows, for Fisher, that ‘capitalist realism is therefore not a particular type of realism; it is more like realism in itself’.³ Contemporary capitalism and the very nature of realism are each contingent on the other. Egan’s text, as well as representing industry, the workplace, and social relations between these institutions as distinctly capitalist through its novelistic realism (as an aesthetic mode), also engages with and narrates the proliferation of ‘realism’ as a political-economic agent of a neoliberal agenda in the very act of representing. Following Alison Shonkwiler and Leigh Claire La Berge (themselves building out of a Gramscian reading), I employ this to refer to the ‘logic of fiscal “common sense”’ that prioritises a macroeconomic agenda of organising a society by its economic cost and promise of future returns: cut costs, maximise profits, increase the flow of capital.⁴ I use the term ‘capitalist realism’ in describing *Goon Squad* in this essay rather than ‘neoliberal’ because reading the neoliberal sensibilities of Egan’s text, while completely valid, centres the focus too much on extratextual pressures rather than the particular ways in which the novel’s realism functions within capitalist reality. We may otherwise be tempted to make the conclusion, as Mitchum Huehls and Rachel Greenwald Smith do, that ‘contemporary literature often capitulates to neoliberalism, working complicitly with it’, rather than recognise, in a kind of base and superstructure formation, the dialogue between representing contemporary capitalism and contemporary capitalism itself.⁵ Instead, neoliberalism should be seen as the broader capitalist structure that is central to the

capitalist realist mode and with which it is deeply engaged, rather than the text being simply reflective, representative, or indicative of an already-existing political and economic landscape.

Egan's novel does not simply reflect the idea that there is no alternative to contemporary capitalism. At the same time, however, its realism is inherently capitalist, and so its narrative limits are also the imaginary limits of capitalism. *Goon Squad* also cannot outwardly criticise capitalism from within this mode; as Fisher notes, a 'moral critique of capitalism [...] only reinforces capitalist realism' because moral stances can be dismissed as incongruous with the business logic of the neoliberal status quo.⁶ Egan's text, then, builds its resistance from within not by tackling capitalism directly, but by revealing how capitalism cannot be necessarily realist. Published in the wake of the 2007/8 financial crisis, the novel does this in relation to an event that logically should have been the death knell for neoliberalism, but its persistence—intensification, even—is symptomatic of the 'no alternative' that capitalist realism exemplifies.⁷ For Fisher, capitalist realism is 'a pervasive *atmosphere*, conditioning not only the production of culture but also the regulation of work and education, and acting as a kind of invisible barrier constraining thought and action'.⁸ This is more than just a political-economic ideology, but a fully-fledged contemporary condition. *Goon Squad* works with and exploits capitalist realism through narrating workplaces that are damaging for the individuals who are trapped within them (as well as others both directly and indirectly) not because they are lacking choice of employment opportunity but by the non-existence of alternative employment conditions no matter what the job itself actually is. Through this, the text reveals that the homogeneity of work under contemporary capitalism (as it encompasses all human life, as will be explored later in this article) is inconsistent with

the reality of individual experience. Narrating in a capitalist realist mode, in this case, highlights the unreality of capitalism.

Egan's novel is part of a wider corpus of American literary fiction published in the immediate years following the 2007/8 financial crisis whose central concerns are of corporations, business models, the interweaving of economic and political spheres, and the social consequences of these entanglements. In terms of narrating contemporary capitalism through the workplace, a notable example from this period is David Foster Wallace's *The Pale King* (2011), which imagines an Internal Revenue Service centre in the mid-1980s as the subject of a fictional government initiative to begin operating with a business logic rather than as an arm of the state. On the other side of the work-home divide, Jess Walter's *The Financial Lives of the Poets* (2009), Adam Haslett's *Union Atlantic* (2009), and Martha McPhee's *Dear Money* (2010) each centre their narratives around housing—specifically mortgages—and chart domestic and familial rupturing through narrating societal financial downturn in a realist mode.⁹ Narrating the working conditions of contemporary capitalism is also prevalent in so-called 'genre fiction': Colson Whitehead's *Zone One* (2011), for example, uses the figure of the zombie as a way to represent economic and bureaucratic catastrophe, with the protagonist Mark Spitz almost consumed by undead human resources agents in the novel's opening scene.¹⁰ All of these novels written at this historical moment respond to the 2007/8 financial crisis through narrating individual American experience as representative of—and contingent with—global economic downturn.

Goon Squad's unique position within this broader genre of post-2007/8 financial crisis fiction can in fact be shown through situating it alongside one of Egan's earlier novels: 2001's *Look at Me*, a text also concerned with the relations between work, capitalism, and representing an assumed 'reality.' *Look at Me* centres around ideas of

seeing, observing, and commodifying an image. The novel's protagonist, Charlotte, is a model who has been involved in an accident and subsequently has reconstructive facial surgery. She later sells live-streamed footage and written 'testimonies' of herself online to viewers. The novel also narrates other characters who openly change their identity and elide recognition through moving location, changing careers, or going through puberty. This text has a similar fascination with nostalgia, memory, and reinvention as *Goon Squad* does, but *Look at Me*'s narrative has a linear structure. Because of this structuring, the novel's imagining of capitalist futurity is similarly linear: technology develops and society moves into the digital, but there is still a longing for the materiality of the past, shown in college professor Moose's despair at the town's loss of steel and glass production and (he believes) subsequent cultural flattening. It is seemingly universal for everyone in *Look at Me*, a homogenous experience of being an economic subject under capitalism—but this is a narrative that *Goon Squad* resists. Egan's more recent text recognises the fact that, as the Warwick Research Collective argue, 'capitalist development does not smooth away but rather produces unevenness, systematically and as a matter of course'.¹¹ This is combined and uneven capitalist development: a representation of capitalist reality not to the simplistic extent that some places or people develop 'first' but to recognise that contemporary capitalism deliberately creates these economic and social hierarchies at a global scale. This is central to *Goon Squad*'s representation of work in a global context, particularly in how the novel narrates the relations between the American economic subject and global structures of political oppression (as will be explored in this article's next section). *Goon Squad*'s construction as a 'quilted text'—fragmented narrative timelines interweaving, with characters shifting between being central and peripheral within these different sections—is also unlike *Look at Me*, and enables this systems-style examination.¹² In this, *Goon Squad* stands apart

among this broader corpus of literature—both Egan’s own body of work and of the authors noted above—because not only does it have a multitude of characters through which it narrates (which Wallace and Haslett’s novel do, as does *Look at Me*), but it is the only text of this ilk (i.e. that narrates contemporary financial pressures following the 2007/8 crisis) that flits across generations as well as narrative focalisation. It definitively does not universalise the economic subject but is rather centrally concerned with relationality. *Goon Squad*, then, is uniquely positioned to examine time and generational shifts in relation to capitalism through the workplace; its narrating of combined and uneven development at both global and local levels is integral to how the novel realises and works to undermine the ubiquity of capitalist realism as both a literary mode and as a broader political ideology.

Violence, media, debt: the sinister fruits of labour

Goon Squad’s thirteen chapters, presented non-chronologically, each centre around a different character, time, and place. There is no clear through-line in terms of plot; rather, what connects these stories are thematic similarities. Characters become tangential presences in other chapters, functioning as contexts (who themselves have their own relations to further contexts), rather than as a component in a teleological cause-and-effect. Through its quilted narratives, the novel reveals the limitations of a chronological reading of contemporary capitalist development. Representations of employment and employers in the novel (and the ways in which the novel itself employs those representations) affect more than just those within the workplace structure. Wider society under neoliberalism, that which is born of what David Harvey would call ‘the

financialization of everything’, is itself is represented and modelled through *Goon Squad*’s capitalist realist narration.¹³

Goon Squad’s capitalist realism, as well as its examinations of temporality and generational relations, is encapsulated by the interplay between two of the novel’s chapters: the novel’s eighth chapter, ‘Selling the General’, and its thirteenth and final chapter, ‘Pure Language’. The first of these, ‘Selling the General’, centres on Dolly Peale (also known by her previous showbiz moniker La Doll in other sections of the novel), a disgraced celebrity public relations consultant who is seemingly forced by economic hardship to work for the autocratic General B and soften the global public perception of him. The general’s country—indeed, even continent—is never explicitly named, although it can be inferred that it is a postcolonial state by the novel’s positioning of the general next to another: the general ‘wanted rehabilitation, American sympathy, an end to the CIA’s assassination attempts. If Qaddafi could do it, why not he?’¹⁴ It is worth noting briefly at this point that this not the only time that *Goon Squad* draws together the coercive nature of work and its relation to global violence. The novel’s fourth chapter, ‘Safari’, narrates a family on safari in Kenya in the 1970s. It is ‘a new business venture’, one which commodifies and exploits the performance of Samburu warriors, one of whom ‘will die in a fire’ before his grandson eventually ‘marr[ies] an American named Lulu and remain[s] in New York’.¹⁵ In the tenth chapter, ‘Out of Body’, it is revealed that Sasha, Bennie Salazar’s assistant, was forced by circumstance when she was younger to become ‘a hooker and a thief—that’s how she survived Naples’.¹⁶ *Goon Squad*, then, is a novel centrally concerned with the violent and exploitative implications of different forms of work across its chapters and the globe. The second chapter this essay focuses on in depth, ‘Pure Language’, is set in the near future and around fourteen years after ‘Selling the General’, in which Dolly’s daughter Lulu—who will marry the Samburu warrior’s

grandson—now works as a marketer attempting to gather as many people as possible to Scotty’s concert at Ground Zero.¹⁷ There is a twofold genealogy here: on the level of individuals, that of family and of one’s employment; and on a structural level, the production of labour power for the capitalist system-at-large. The latter is present in the gap between the two chapters, both in terms of narrative chronology but also literally in the five chapters in-between that centre around other characters.

In ‘Selling the General’, Dolly’s reputation and ‘net worth’ are at an all-time low following an accident two years prior.¹⁸ Now freelance, her life is defined by continuous work and precarious finances, where ‘faxes usually came at around 3 a.m.’, and her ‘three allotted hours of sleep were spent in spasms of worry at the thought of [Lulu’s] next monstrous tuition bill’.¹⁹ Her workplace is a hybrid ‘office/bedroom’, a conflation of work and home that marks an invasion into the domestic space.²⁰ With these working conditions, Dolly is certainly not working 9 To 5.²¹ Under contemporary capitalism, regular working hours are not a way to make a living anymore: the demands of work have shifted to be ever-present. This conflation is both spatial and temporal, with work invading both Dolly’s home and all of her time. Her character functions as a precursor to her daughter’s position at the end of the novel. While she is not a ‘handset employee’ like Lulu later becomes, her mode of working is similarly ‘omnipresent’.²² Dolly is something of an embodiment of an idealised private sector employee, her mode of working determined by a society undergoing financialisation. She is not an actor or representative for a larger public relations business: she is a freelance worker, she herself *is* the business. Dolly’s existence straddles both individual and institution because of the very nature of her work. As an individual, she is forced to rationalise her involvement with the general through financial anxiety that is tied to the concept of a free labour market, that ‘if she didn’t take this job someone else would snap it up’.²³ The focalised narration tells how

‘when the first installment appeared in her bank account, Dolly’s relief was so immense that it almost obliterated the tiny anxious muttering voice inside her: *Your client is a genocidal dictator*’.²⁴ The ‘installment [...] in her bank account’ and her ‘relief’ frontload the sentence rather than the thoughts of the general’s appalling violence, prioritising the financial over the moral through the narrative’s sentence structure. The nature of the narration and the internal logic with which this section operates is indicative of the novel’s capitalist realism as an ideological formation, of ‘the contemporary condition in which all social and political possibility is seemingly bound up in the economic status quo’.²⁵ There is no alternative for Dolly: she must do this, and the narrative represents this as such through her. That she is desperate for financial stability dictates how the novel represents her, the narrative adopting the logic of its subject in the act of representing. The possibility of prioritising the ‘tiny anxious muttering voice’ is cast aside because the economic status quo—that which demands Dolly sells her labour to the general for an increase in his social (and by extension, financial) capital through a combination of financial anxiety and, ironically, her own bad PR—reconfigures Dolly not as a social being but a direct agent of contemporary capitalism due to her dual existence as an individual worker who has adopted the logic of a business structure. As Hywel Dix notes of this moment, ‘Egan’s depiction of a woman who performs public relations work for a dictator to salvage her own career is both comical and implicitly critical of an economy that deals so prevalently in images that it makes such a scenario necessary, no matter how morally repugnant’.²⁶ This does not give way ‘to a restored faith in systems but to a recognition of the ruling order of capitalism as both more banal and more encompassing’.²⁷ As much as Dolly is pressured to work for the genocidal dictator to improve his public image as a result of her individual circumstances, the novel’s own

representation of those circumstances in a realist mode is likewise a product of the encompassing nature of capital.

The capitalist realist narrative mode intensifies as Dolly's work is successful. In a satire of global news coverage, the general is the subject of much more sympathetic headlines following Dolly's publicity drive to get him to wear endearing clothes and, later, photographing him with actress Kitty Jackson. Through white American women, the general of the postcolonial country is rendered acceptable to the global (read: western/Global North) population. Upon changing the general's look, Dolly's voice takes over the narrative: 'It was the hat. He looked sweet in the hat. How could a man in a fuzzy blue hat have used human bones to pave his roads?'.²⁸ The message of the PR stunt, filtered through Dolly, becomes the narrative voice, encouraging both a complicity and a scepticism of a narration that can be so easily co-opted by the very PR campaign that it is representing. Not only does the narrative 'describe the pervasive logic of capitalism in the present' but it also models 'the very commodification and financialization that it records'.²⁹ Dolly embodies this dual process, describing the logic through her self-awareness but also modelling and representing it for the novel (as its own institutional structure) itself, functioning as a novelistic representation of Laura Finch's assertion that 'this era of financialization can be theorized both at the macro world-historical scale, and at the micro level of quotidian experience'.³⁰ Such representation means that *Goon Squad* acts as something in-between, mediating between macro and micro, doing both simultaneously. In equating the risk-reward structure of Dolly's campaign—and its success resulting in Dolly's subsequent financial stability—with a maintaining of the political status quo in the general's country, Egan's novel realises financialisation on both levels of Finch's theorisation; this is how its capitalist realism functions at the level of narrative diegesis.

However, to see the novel's capitalist realist mode as evidence of its subsuming to structures of neoliberal power is to disregard part of what *Goon Squad* is doing. If we are to take issue with the novel's modelling of 'the very commodification and financialization that it records', then the critique becomes skewed towards questions of intent, and subsequently tied up with questions of moral value. This recalls Fisher's claim that a 'moral critique of capitalism [...] only reinforces capitalist realism'.³¹ But rather than trying to challenge or even break down capitalist realism, Egan's text is exploiting it through representing the inadequacy of moral intent as a critical approach when one is encompassed in a capitalist realist mode. The enactment of both the macro and micro level theorisations that Finch discusses through the narrative's focalisation of Dolly's voice means that the novel posits an unspoken criticism of the ease with which Dolly goes through with her PR campaign for the general, resulting in her own personal gain. That the narrative moves from describing the general as a genocidal dictator to attempting to convince the reader, through assuming Dolly's voice, that 'a man in a fuzzy blue hat [couldn't] have used human bones to pave his roads' within the space of two pages is testament to this.³² Dolly herself recognises that she would line up excuses 'should that small dissident voice pluck up its courage to speak', making clear that (self-)deception and quashing the possibility of alternative courses of action are intrinsic to the capitalist realism the novel records and undergoes.³³ 'So long as we believe (in our hearts) that capitalism is bad', Fisher writes, 'we are free to continue to participate in capitalist exchange'.³⁴ Dolly's work is contingent on the devaluing of her own moral code and her ability to quash her own internal protest in an economic exchange, both despite and because of her self-awareness of her position.

While at the micro level the novel is subsumed to capitalist and financialised modes within its narrative for its characters, at the macro level of narration the text draws

on this representation of the suspension of moral judgement. This is not to eliminate moral value (or even to engage with a moral critique of capitalist realism) but rather to *reinstate* it by highlighting and subtly satirising the unnerving ease with which Dolly continues her life after enabling the genocidal dictator to be absolved by the media. She is paid ‘hush money’ by the general’s right-hand man, which she uses to ‘open a small gourmet shop on Main Street’ in a ‘small upstate [New York] town’.³⁵ This is in direct opposition to the market vendor in the general’s country from whom Dolly and Lulu take and eat a star fruit; this vendor, because they were with the general’s men, ‘smiled, nodding eagerly at Dolly and Lulu, but his eyes look frightened’.³⁶ The chapter ends with the information that ‘now and then Dolly would get a shipment of star fruit’ at her upmarket shop.³⁷ The novel provokes unease by showing how Dolly and Lulu, now living in a town frequented by ‘New Yorkers who came on weekends to their country houses’, would ‘feast on the sweet, strange flesh’ despite the troubling circumstances of their first taste of star fruit, presumably in the fruit’s country of origin.³⁸ In using the adjective ‘strange’ to describe the star fruit that is representative of (post)colonial violence necessary to capitalist development in the US, the novel—especially given its broader musical themes—demands comparisons with the 1939 Billie Holiday song ‘Strange Fruit’, which protested the lynching of African Americans. In the song, the ‘strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees’ are ‘black bodies swinging in the Southern breeze’. The fruit *is* the violence. What flesh is being feasted on to provide economic stability for Dolly and Lulu? Is it literally that of the star fruit, or that of those living frightened under the general’s authoritarian rule? The chapter lingers on the violence implied by this final word ‘flesh’, the sentence feeling unfinished upon reading, specifically charged with the fear evoked in the market vendor the first time Dolly and Lulu eat the fruit, and the cumulative power of the time that has passed in-between the two moments. Such a moment recalls Danica van de

Velde's discussion of the novel's fascination with gaps and pauses, where 'the pause in Egan's text is employed as an overarching metaphor designed to represent the threatening presence of all that is lost in the passage of time'.³⁹ The pregnant pause left by the sentence's imperfect cadence is certainly a threatening presence. It is all the more sinister for being 'sweet' and 'strange' in its violent implications, for being desirable and simultaneously unexplainable, at the same time as being representative, even foundational, of Dolly and Lulu's social and financial comfort. Rather than Egan's novel endorsing Dolly's actions, or explicitly producing a moral critique from within its realist narrative world that would only reinforce capitalist realism, *Goon Squad* is instead using Dolly's work to reveal the postcolonial violence of combined and uneven capitalist development precisely through a realist representation.

Dolly's employment by the general affects more than just employer and employee. The complicity in postcolonial violence inherent in her work in combination with the restraints of the labour market dictated by Dolly's own unfavourable reputation call to attention Alison Shonkwiler's argument for the 'financial imaginary', which is predicated on the fact that

[g]lobal structures of inequality, [...] the dismantling of social protections, the 'realism' of austerity politics, and all kinds of social, political, and environmental violence are very real. Financialization specialises in putting distance between these concrete effects and the structural violence of an abstract value that is measured by nothing but the stock market.⁴⁰

For Shonkwiler, 'finance must be understood as a *process* of abstractification and concretization', where such abstractification does not necessarily mean 'less real'.⁴¹ The implicit threat of material violence from the general's men that frightens the street vendor

is reimagined in the linguistic abstraction of the fruit's 'flesh,' coupling the uncomfortable past with the privileged metropolitan present. Egan's prose enacts Shonkwiler's process, the paradoxical simultaneous actions of abstractification and concretisation. The white characters are reaping the financial benefits of the structural postcolonial violence in the narrative past, and the spectre of that violence is transposed to the present by the presence of the star fruit. The fruit becomes representative of the 'abstract value that is measured by nothing but the stock market', an object that is financially Dolly's current livelihood but is also her past (and continuing) complicity with this violence. It is a process of financialisation in the American upstate town that removes the previous global context for the characters, changes the meaning of the object, and facilitates their life in this newer context. The narrative, however, prevents the reader from this same process. The star fruit is simultaneously both violence and financial stability, the dual existence brought into being by the novel form. Where financialisation, as Shonkwiler notes, 'specialises in putting distance between these concrete effects and the structural violence of an abstract value', Egan's novel, through the narrative trajectory of the star fruit and the capitalist realist mode of its narration, challenges the very processes of financialisation and uneven capitalist development by bringing concrete effect and structural violence closer together.⁴²

Goon Squad pushes this further still. The idea that Dolly and Lulu are completely safe in New York at the expense of others is misguided. It is not only the oppressed people of the general's country that are the subject of violence, but also Dolly and Lulu themselves, living in a different kind of precarious situation. Their seemingly comfortable existence in New York is predicated on them trusting that the general in turn trusts them to keep quiet, with them having been paid the hush money. This money is not Dolly's fee for her services, the cost of her labour, but something else. She is in their debt now, and

this is the general's investment in maintaining power structures that keeps Dolly in check. As a complicit agent in the structure of financialised capitalism, Dolly accepts the dangerous security: her silence. The hush money is not the generous bonus Dolly makes it seem, but instead ensures that she is held in the general's debt by his bestowing of money upon her as a veiled threat. All that Dolly possesses, materially and emotionally, is held by the general. That the hush money is used to fund the shop, and therefore the star fruit, is significant. To this end, sociologist Maurizio Lazzarato notes how 'money [when used as capital] functions as a financing structure [...] it has the possibility of choosing and deciding on future production and commodities and, therefore, on the relations of power and subjection underlying them. Money as capital preempts the future'.⁴³ The money-as-financing-capital is not that which comes from Dolly, but the general. When money is used for this function, the future becomes the present, dictating the direction of both economic and social relations in relation to that future endeavour. The debt that Dolly has to the general is a continuation of the violence in his own country, concretised through the purchase of the shop and star fruit while simultaneously abstracted through the implicit threat should she speak of the encounter. There is a circularity here: the financing from postcolonial violence in the general's country leads to a recognition of that violence for the reader because of the way in which the narrative representation of the star fruit operates, with the macro structure transposed to the micro object. The extracted commodity is also the violence of global capitalism and subsequent financialisation, that in which one working subject is complicit in the oppression of another across a world-system. This is made real for Dolly but only recognised by the reader through the novel's capitalist realism: one way or another, like the frightened market vendor, she will be silent.

Omnipresent employees, invasive technologies

The interweaving of postcolonial violence with financial exchange and control of future power relations in Dolly's narrative culminates in her daughter's cultural ideology in the novel's final chapter, 'Pure Language'. In this chapter, focalised through Lulu's co-worker Alex and set in the early 2020s, Lulu, now a young adult, is Bennie Salazar's assistant and is working to promote ageing guitarist Scotty Hausmann's concert. Lulu is 'a living embodiment of the new "handset employee": paperless, deskless, commuteless, and theoretically omnipresent', her work and her personal life conflated so that her entire existence is commodifiable labour.⁴⁴ In this near-future, the handset of the 'handset employee' is a device that, among other things, uses messaging services called Ts, which appear to function similar to truncated instant messaging in combination with mass social media dissemination. Alongside this, the handsets alter the development of children exposed to them and their infinite network—those old enough to point have handsets, and thus are known as 'pointers'. Lulu works entirely on such a device. Where Dolly's condition of employment and financial stability is subsumed to the violence of global capitalism, Lulu's condition of employment is the complete eroding of a distinction between work and leisure through technological advancement. The automisation of labour does not take work away; rather, it multiplies it *in extremis*. Where Dolly was essentially the same kind of worker (minus the technology) because she was a freelancer, Lulu operates in this way despite being definitively in employment. *Goon Squad* positions this technology of the near-future, and consequently the totalising working conditions, as a result of the contemporary iterations of colonial violence and neocolonial complicity

that are inherent in contemporary capitalism as represented previously in Dolly's narrative.

Of course, this eroding of the work/leisure distinction only operates in one direction, and it is not to make work more pleasurable: Lulu exists to work. Her very ideology is based entirely in market terms: she mocks Alex's argument that there is something 'inherently wrong with believing in something—or saying you do—for *money*' by calling it 'a great example of calcified morality [...] if I believe, I believe. Who are you to judge my reasons?'. 'If your reasons are cash, that's not belief. It's bullshit', Alex claims, holding on to the idea that there is an inherent moral value.⁴⁵ Lulu's ethics can be bought and sold in the marketplace for financial gain and her 'omnipresent' labour is intrinsically tied to her very existence. She is a product of her mother Dolly's actions, themselves a product of her prioritising of her own financial precarity over the vulnerability of global Others. Whereas Dolly's complicity in the general's regime is fuelled by the novel's revealing of her financial limitations, Lulu's narrative in this final chapter is not granted the same contextual exposition. In removing individual context, and with the only other reference point in the entire novel for Lulu being in the 'Selling the General' chapter, she can only be associated with all-encompassing marketing work through a family genealogy. As Lulu's working life as a handset employee is indicative of the novel's near-future, and Dolly's narrative is the only context for the development of Lulu's devotion to work, the implication, then, is that the postcolonial violence of Dolly's narrative is essential to the formation of this moment in the near-future. At the macro level of the novel-as-system, the inevitability of the world being this way in the near-future is the foreshortening of the horizon for working and employment conditions from the moment we learn of Dolly's all-encompassing freelance PR work, and what violence she has become implicated and complicit in.

It is not just Lulu who uses the handsets for work, though: Alex does too, although he is not quite a handset employee. He is uneasy about paying covert message-sharers, known as ‘parrots’, to masquerade as genuinely excited concertgoers, using their own handsets and Ts to raise and spread online hype around Scotty’s gig. From his perspective (he is older than Lulu, and holds views of previous generations), the cost of increasing attendance is an ethical one. Alex’s search for inherent moral value and belief at the same time as performing the working role of marketer is indicative of capitalist realism. ‘We didn’t have to believe it, we only had to act as if we believed it’, Fisher argues, and ‘the idea that our “inner beliefs” mattered more than what we were publicly professing at work was crucial to capitalist realism’.⁴⁶ In this view, capitalist realism depends on this notion of ‘inner beliefs’ as a site of perceived authentic selfhood, and the split between work and non-work is essential for this to function: ‘we acquiesce at work because work and “what we really are” have to remain separate’.⁴⁷ Alex’s moral code is seen as quaint and outmoded not only in the seeming non-existence of such a thing in this near-future, but also in its very process: how can there be such a thing as inherent belief in morality when one engages in actions at work that would not be contingent with such a code? In contrast, the fact that Lulu, the handset employee, exists to work means that there is no separation of work and leisure for her and, by extension, her generation. As such, capitalist realism as Fisher describes it exists for Alex (as he holds onto this idea of inner authentic selfhood) at the same time as the novel imagines a new formation of it for Lulu and her generation.

The T messages are not just instant in the sending and receiving, but seemingly in their creation and inception too. The novel details how characters T each other, even when physically next to each other. When Lulu struggles to explain an idea fully to Alex, she complains that ‘all we’ve got are metaphors, and they’re never exactly right’, perhaps in

search of the ‘pure language’ of the chapter’s title.⁴⁸ She Ts him instead: with ‘no philosophy, no metaphors, no judgments’ of human interaction, Lulu becomes ‘almost sleepy with relief’ that she can ask Alex ‘*U hav sum nAms 4 me?*’ without having to deal with what she perceives as the complexities and inaccuracies of speech.⁴⁹ The apparent absolute neutrality of the Ts, especially with no philosophy or judgments, marks a strange turn where communication between subjects is divorced from cultural and political engagement, and instead becomes something used only for economic function and the barest of efficient social interaction. In this regard, it is important that the conversation shifts from philosophising about language to an economically efficient work conversation about the names of the prospective parrots. There can be ‘no philosophy, no metaphors, no judgments’ when work is all there is to talk about, and when everyone’s working conditions are homogenised to an extreme degree. *Goon Squad* integrates these exchanges into the narrative alongside direct speech, not altering the representation of this future world and being differentiated only on a formal level by their exaggerated truncated spelling and italicisation. Alex even thinks in this form when he and his wife Rebecca have a verbal disagreement, instinctively finding himself ‘mentally composing the message: *Nu job in th wrks. big \$ pos. pls kEp opn mind*’.⁵⁰ The instant nature of the T to the level of thought, superseding verbal speech, reconfigures the notion of communication. Rather than speaking-without-thinking, this is thinking-as-digital-speaking, an instant social transaction in which the future vocalisation of the thought is brought in line with the thought itself. At this formal level, the text both represents and enacts, narrating this complex temporal logic of finance capitalism without also necessarily being subsumed to its political propensities. The Ts become the way to alleviate disagreements and hurt feelings, but only through forgoing recognising those frictions ever existed and by talking about work and money instead. The lack of

philosophy, metaphors, and judgments that Lulu claims are selling points of this new form of communication are part of a ruthless economic efficiency of an optimised connection.

The parrots work better than intended, and Scotty's concert is wildly popular. It stands to reason that the locus of the concert's legendary status is in the actions of the marketers who caused it to be so popular through organising the parrots on the handsets. As Michael Szalay argues, 'the triumph of the novel ends, in other words, with a triumph of marketing'.⁵¹ This is certainly the case, and the notion of successful marketing harks back to Dolly marketing the genocidal general to the press at the global level and the transposing of that violence to the material object of the star fruit in the bourgeois upstate New York shop. Here that same violence is traced through the generations: through Lulu's experiences with her mother, through her contemporary ideology and workplace as facilitated by the handsets, and ultimately manifested in Scotty's concert and the joyous affective reaction of the concertgoers. The marketing, then, is successful not only because it achieves its primary goal of getting more people to the concert by any means (financially) necessary, but also because it is dependent on the foundations laid by a postcolonial extractive industry, maintaining the hierarchies of the global contemporary capitalist world-system. As the novel, focalised through Alex, explicitly charts the connection from Lulu to Bennie to Dolly, Alex cannot 'pinpoint why exactly [Lulu] disconcerted him'— and at this point, Alex 'stopped himself' from 'pursu[ing] this line of questioning'.⁵² While Alex has no idea of the systematic violence that Lulu and Dolly are implicated in from all those years prior, the active decision for the American man to not question exploitative globalisation is enacted by the novel itself. In this way, the marketers themselves function as agents of the capitalist world-system on both economic and social planes, encapsulating how 'the relations between abstract and concrete tend to

be elided' by being unable, at the level of narrative diegesis, to draw together the abstract feeling of joy at the concert with the concrete violence in the general's country all those years before.⁵³ By representing the ways in which the individual is co-opted into a capitalist macrostructure, and without openly critiquing that structure at the level of diegesis, Egan's text lays bare the limitations of this kind of societal modelling.

Where Lulu is the logical endpoint of Dolly's process of disavowing ethics and structural responsibility for marketing and PR, Scotty's concert ushers in something new. The crowd are enraptured by Scotty's analogue ideology, 'a man you knew just by looking had never had a page or a profile or a handle or a handset, who was part of no one's data, a guy who had lived in the cracks all these years, forgotten and full of rage, in a way that now registered as pure. Untouched'.⁵⁴ Alex, however, is enraptured by something else: the acceleration of social transaction and the acute management of the financialised future to the extent that he viscerally '[feels] what was happening around him as if it had already happened and he were looking back'.⁵⁵ Nostalgia itself has been integrated into present consciousness, the present being so instantaneous that it already feels like a lost past. But it specifically *feels*: this is something that has become intrinsic to the way in which Alex relates to the world around him. This is the moment Alex realises the narrative world's capitalist realism, the 'no alternative' available to him: as much as the horizon of the future has been brought forward, the horizon of the past has caught up. At this point of recognition, all Alex can do 'in desperation' is T his wife Rebecca, seeing her 'register the vibration, pause in her dancing, and reach for it'.⁵⁶ The joy of Rebecca's dancing is rendered as always conditional, always temporary when the possibility of an interrupting T exists.

The memory of the world of the novel before Ts, handset employees, and pointers fades at the end of Scotty's gig. It is exemplified in multiple ways in this final chapter.

The most obvious of these is that which has already been discussed: that it seems impossible to even talk of ethics and morality as having any intrinsic value, let alone divorce any sense of them from money. Another is in language and thought itself, co-opted by the Ts in Alex and Lulu speaking over them because ‘All we’ve got are metaphors [...] You can’t ever just *Say. The. Thing*’.⁵⁷ Perhaps the most sinister is that the triumph of Scotty’s performance as being pure and untouched is immediately undercut by the need for consumption of it: ‘it’s hard to know anymore who was really *at* that first Scotty Hausmann concert—more people claim it than could possibly have fit into the space’.⁵⁸ People in this near-future are desperate in their need for consumption and (re)appropriation of a memory that they do not own. Alex stands as someone who remembers the old way of doing things, exemplified by the way he and Rebecca do not allow their daughter Cara-Ann to use the handsets, but he is drawn even further into the capitalist realist milieu during Scotty’s performance. He sees Rebecca and Cara-Ann dancing through the zoom function on his handset, and then Ts them. The only way he can actually see them is literally through the technology, and the only way he can speak to them during this moment hailed as a transcendent experience of connection is mediated through that same piece of technology: the handset, then, is the singularity through which the work/leisure divide is obliterated.

It is the same technology that flattens Alex’s moral code, interrupts Rebecca’s dancing, and describes Lulu’s job—the handset employee being that which brings about the euphoria of the concert in the first place. The marketing manufactures both creation and destruction. It is the continuous reforming of capitalist reality, in which there is no planned endgame beyond new configurations (through technology or otherwise) of the same power structures. Egan’s novel is capitalist realist in its mode of representation but not in its structural ideology. It positions global exploitation and oppressive violence as

integral to contemporary capitalist production (and, indeed, the production and perpetuation of contemporary capitalism itself) through its quilted narratives, reinstating a global reality that was wilfully forgotten and rendered as an abstraction due to the passing of time. ‘You gonna let that goon push you around?’ Bennie asks, and all Scotty can reply is ‘The goon won’.⁵⁹ In this imagined future Scotty is right, but Bennie’s question masks the full truth; the goon is not time in isolation, but time as an agent of capitalist production.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to the anonymous reviewers for your generous and constructive feedback. Many thanks also to Hamilton Carroll, Adrienne Mortimer, and Liam Wilby for reading earlier versions of this article.

Notes

¹ Jennifer Egan, *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (London: Corsair, 2010), p. 341.

² Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2009), p. 2.

³ Fisher, p. 4.

⁴ *Reading Capitalist Realism*, ed. by Alison Shonkwiler and Leigh Claire La Berge (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2014), p. 1.

⁵ *Neoliberalism and Contemporary Literary Culture*, ed. by Mitchum Huehls and Rachel Greenwald Smith (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2017), p. 15.

⁶ Fisher, p. 16.

⁷ This phenomenon is examined in book-length studies; see Philip Mirowski, *Never Let a Serious Crisis Go to Waste: How Neoliberalism Survived the Financial Meltdown* (London:

Verso, 2013) and Colin Crouch, *The Strange Non-Death of Neoliberalism* (Cambridge: Polity, 2011).

⁸ Fisher, p. 16.

⁹ For more on particular renderings and critical understandings of realism, especially in relation to feminism, see Regina Martin, 'The Feminist Realism of Zadie Smith's *On Beauty*', *MFS Modern Fiction Studies*, 65.4 (2019), 579–98 <<https://doi.org/10.1353/mfs.2019.0045>>.

¹⁰ For more on contemporary genre fiction and capitalism, see Hamilton Carroll and Annie McClanahan, 'Fictions of Speculation: Introduction', *Journal of American Studies*, 49.4 (2015), 655–61.

¹¹ Warwick Research Collective, *Combined and Uneven Development: Towards a New Theory of World-Literature*, 17 (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015), p. 12.

¹² Alexander Scherr and Ansgar Nünning, "'Reality Hunger,'" Documentarianism, and Fragmentation in Twenty-First-Century Anglophone Novels', in *New Approaches to the Twenty-First-Century Anglophone Novel*, ed. by Sibylle Baumbach and Birgit Neumann (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), pp. 79–98 (p. 90). Also see Margaret Dunn and Ann Morris, 'Narrative Quilts and Quilted Narratives: The Art of Faith Ringgold and Alice Walker', *Explorations in Ethnic Studies*, 15.1 (1992), 27–32.

¹³ David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 33.

¹⁴ Egan, p. 146.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 63–65.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 211.

¹⁷ For more on *Goon Squad*'s narrative timeline, and the novel's fascination with temporality, see David Cowart, 'Thirteen Ways of Looking: Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad*', *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 56.3 (2015), 241–54 and Melissa J. Strong, 'Found Time: Kairos in *A Visit from the Goon Squad*', *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 59.4 (2018), 471–80.

¹⁸ Egan, p. 151.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 146.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 145.

²¹ I am indebted to Rebecca Macklin for brilliantly pointing out how Egan's Dolly, in a novel about the music industry, lives an intensified version of Dolly Parton's exasperation at the daily grind.

²² Egan, p. 325.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 147.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Shonkwiler and La Berge, p. 2.

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- ²⁶ Hywel Dix, 'Unfulfilled Vocations in Contemporary American Fiction', *Textual Practice*, 2020, 1–18 (p. 15) <<https://doi.org/10.1080/0950236X.2020.1788135>>.
- ²⁷ Shonkwiler and La Berge, p. 16.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 149.
- ²⁹ Shonkwiler and La Berge, pp. 14–15.
- ³⁰ Laura Finch, 'The Un-Real Deal: Financial Fiction, Fictional Finance, and the Financial Crisis', *Journal of American Studies*, 49.04 (2015), 731–53 (pp. 732–33).
- ³¹ Fisher, p. 16.
- ³² Egan, p. 149.
- ³³ *Ibid.*, p. 147.
- ³⁴ Fisher, p. 13.
- ³⁵ Egan, p. 174.
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 161. Should the star fruit be native to the general's unnamed country, then it could be feasibly assumed that this country is somewhere in southeast Asia.
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 174.
- ³⁸ *Ibid.*
- ³⁹ Danica van de Velde, "'Every Song Ends": Musical Pauses, Gendered Nostalgia, and Loss in Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad*', in *Write in Tune: Contemporary Music in Fiction*, ed. by Erich Hertz and Jeffrey Roessner (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), pp. 123–35 (p. 123).
- ⁴⁰ Alison Shonkwiler, *The Financial Imaginary: Economic Mystification and the Limits of Realist Fiction* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), p. xxv.
- ⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. xxiii.
- ⁴² *Ibid.*, p. xxv.
- ⁴³ Maurizio Lazzarato, *The Making of the Indebted Man: An Essay on the Neoliberal Condition*, trans. by Joshua David Jordan (Amsterdam: Semiotext(e), 2011), p. 74.
- ⁴⁴ Egan, p. 325.
- ⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 327.
- ⁴⁶ Mark Fisher and Jeremy Gilbert, 'Capitalist Realism and Neoliberal Hegemony: A Dialogue', *New Formations*, 80–81 (2013), 89–101 (p. 91) <<https://doi.org/10.3898/neWF.80/81.05.2013>>.
- ⁴⁷ Fisher and Gilbert, p. 94.
- ⁴⁸ Egan, p. 328.
- ⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 329.
- ⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 333.

⁵¹ Michael Szalay, 'The Author as Executive Producer', in *Neoliberalism and Contemporary Literary Culture*, ed. by Mitchum Huehls and Rachel Greenwald Smith (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2017), pp. 255–76 (p. 269).

⁵² Egan, pp. 325–26.

⁵³ Shonkwiler, p. xxv.

⁵⁴ Egan, p. 344.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 345.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 328.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 344.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 341.