

## **“The Aesthetic of the Gap”: The Limits of Storytelling in the Work of Jennifer Egan**

**Alicia J. Rouverol**

### **Abstract**

*A Visit from the Goon Squad (2010) is distinctively marked by the use of gaps and lacunae within the narrative’s construction, directing the reader’s focus to the unnarrated. This article examines the resultant silences and storytelling that emerges from them in the novel, with a consideration of Egan’s earlier works, The Invisible Circus (1995), Look at Me (2001), The Keep (2006), and “Black Box” (2012). Egan’s use of prolepsis, analepsis, and the juxtaposition of story time to narrative time in A Visit from the Goon Squad creates an aesthetic of the gap, which finds a new way to dramatize the impossibility of a total narrative. The novel breaks with traditional narrative structures, illustrating “Spiral Time” to evince questions of limitation and possibility within the work.*

The not-said is so ferociously important.

– Ali Smith (qtd. in Higgins)

In this article, I argue that Jennifer Egan’s Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2010), is distinctively marked by the author’s use of gaps and lacunae within the narrative’s construction, directing our focus to what I will call the “unnarrated.” *A Visit from the Goon Squad* follows the lives of a host of characters, linked through shared connections to the American music industry from the 1970s to the 2020s, with Sasha Blake and the music producer she works for, Bennie Salazar, arguably the novel’s chief characters.

The book features multiple narrators, located across time and geographical locale: individuals who are keenly concerned with the passage of time and the prospect of redeeming their past through “storying” or, more accurately, “re-storying” their lives (Kenyon and Randall). Egan’s fascination with storytelling is not restricted to this work. Storytelling – what narrators narrate as well as the gaps in narration, the silences in-between, or what I call the “aesthetic of the gap” – plays a key role in many of her novels. The desire to assess the personal past, to resolve prior difficulties in search of new beginnings, serves as a driving force for many of Egan’s characters who, in so doing, narrativize, or re-narrativize, their (fictional) lives within the fictional world of the story. Composed of discrete yet interlocking stories, *A Visit from the Goon Squad*’s narrative remains nonetheless discontinuous; the book thus draws attention to narrativization, on one hand, and gaps in narration, on the other. Important chronological events in story time occur off-page, leaving the reader to reconstruct the novel’s plot and resulting in gaps in narrative time or “ellipses” (Genette 51), effectively creating silences across the work.

In her earlier novels, *The Invisible Circus* (1995), *Look at Me* (2001), and *The Keep* (2006), Egan’s exploration of storytelling and the silences that give rise to it might suggest the author’s focus to be on the redemptive capacity of story. In *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, however, in what is a hitherto unremarked turn in her work’s development, Egan enacts this “aesthetic of the gap” to articulate instead the limitations of storytelling, dramatizing the impossibility of a total narrative. She does so through shifting points of view and voice, juxtaposition of story time to narrative time, and skillful employment of analepsis and prolepsis, which Gérard Genette defines, respectively, as “any evocation after the fact of an event that took place earlier than the point in the story where we are at any given moment” and “any narrative manoeuvre that consists of narrating or evoking in advance an event that will take place later” (40).<sup>1</sup> The resultant shifts in time, which give rise to Egan’s “aesthetic

of the gap,” constitute the principle narratological strategy by which Egan creates silences in her narrative to articulate her vision of storytelling and its constraints. The novel’s silences and unnarrated components raise the question too of what is “knowable” in the novel or the limits of knowledge. “Limits of knowledge” does not imply a consequent lack of meaning in the work; rather, as Jean-Luc Nancy suggests in “Elliptical Sense,” “an ellipsis of meaning is what makes the meaning” (178). “Meaning thirsts for its own *ellipsis*,” Nancy writes, “for that which hides it, eludes it, which silently lets it pass,” suggesting that there remains meaning even in absence (178).

This article explores not only such silences, then, but also the narratological strategy that Egan employs, especially in the juxtaposition of story time with narrative time, and her creative strategies for setting both time schemes in opposition or confounding them altogether. Drawing on Genette’s temporal constructions of “story” and “narrative” (or “discourse”) and Brian Richardson’s notion of “circular temporality” (“Beyond Story” 48), I argue that *A Visit from the Goon Squad* does not fit neatly into either Genette’s or Richardson’s models. Indeed, the novel demonstrates the ways in which Genette’s binary does not hold up in more experimental works. As Richardson has noted, “story” and “discourse” as categories “do not work if applied to many late modernist and postmodern texts, since they are predicated on distinctions that experimental writers are determined to preclude, deny, or confound” (“Beyond Story” 47). Richardson offers six examples of types of temporality in narrative that break out of Genette’s bounds: “Circular,” “Contradictory,” “Antinomic,” “Differential,” “Conflated,” and “Dual” or “Multiple” (“Beyond Story” 48-52). As Richardson suggests, late modernist and experimental writing are often predicated on distinctions that “preclude, deny, or confound” – indeed, as distinct aims of the author (“Beyond Story” 47). I will argue that the breakdown of Genette’s temporal constructions of “story time” and “narrative time” allows time to “spiral” in *A Visit from the Goon Squad* as a

central protagonist evolves into a new character (or a re-characterized version of an existing character). Because this strategy suggests not merely a circular but rather a spiral ending, I call it “Spiral Time.” Where Richardson defines “Circular” as a closing that returns to its own beginning, suggesting an infinite loop (“Beyond Story” 48), I define “Spiral” as appearing to circle back to the book’s origins, but only hinting at a return to the beginning, creating rather an echo effect. At the novel’s close, the narrative spirals upward or outward into the book’s newly developing characters and storylines. These are suggested through the arrival of a “new Sasha” and, in Egan’s subsequent short story, “Black Box” (2012), through the re-emergence of Lulu as a character. A spiral ending or “Spiral Time” constitutes a forward movement in the novel, but one that evokes “openness,” evincing renewed questions of both limitation and possibility within the work. Thus *A Visit from the Goon Squad*’s spiral ending opens up the book’s “plane of potentialities” (Colebrook 9).

### **Egan’s Use of Time in *A Visit from the Goon Squad***

What makes *A Visit from the Goon Squad*’s use of time unconventional is not simply the novel’s gaps and pauses, but its relative temporal disorder, the degree to which story time and narrative time are disjoined, as the novel jumps across time-frames forwards and backwards, and with considerable gaps in narration. By “gaps,” I mean gaps in narrative time where the chronology is out of sequence: unnarrated gaps in story time, events that have transpired in the novel but that we have not been told about within narrative time. What I will refer to as “pauses” are intentional breaks in music, or conversation (dialogue) between characters: these are pauses, then, in the narrative or within narrative time, which are also rendered musically (through charts in the chapter presented as a PowerPoint, “Great Rock and Roll Pauses” 242).

As Martin Moling explains, Sasha's daughter, Alison, explores her brother Lincoln's fascination with pauses as "they delay the songs' definitive ending" (57). The interest in musical pauses is buttressed not only by the book's plot being set loosely in the music industry, but also by the novel's structural engagement with the form of a record – featuring an "A" part and a "B" part, suggesting "sides," as well as chapters (arguably songs) on each side. Egan herself acknowledges that she conceived of the book as an LP recording: "If *Goon Squad* is about pauses, then 'A to B' is the space inside of which the pauses take place" ("An Interview with Jennifer Egan").

Yet the "gaps" and "pauses" nonetheless result in crucial silences in the book. We are not exposed to actions off the page (they are not narrated) in the former case; in the latter, we experience these silences simply as pauses. These anachronisms also reveal the ways in which Egan has disrupted Gunther Müller's *erzählte Zeit* ("story time") and *Erzählzeit* ("narrative time"),<sup>2</sup> terms which emphasize the doubleness of time within the narrative, highlighting the juxtaposition of these dual temporalities as well as the distinction between the re-telling of events (narrative time) and the actual occurrence or chronology of those events (story time) within a work. But it is the novel's "unnarrated elements" that underpin Egan's aesthetic: by "unnarrated," I mean the story a narrator neglects or refuses to tell. As Robyn R. Warhol notes, "If the 'disnarrated' describes those passages in a narrative that tell what did not happen, what I call the 'unnarrated' refers to those passages that explicitly do not tell what is supposed to have happened, foregrounding the narrator's refusal to narrate" (Warhol 221; Prince 1). Warhol posits four types of the "unnarratable": what "needn't be told" (*subnarratable*); "can't be told" (*supranarratable*); "shouldn't be told" (*antinarratable*); and "wouldn't be told" (*paranarratable*) (222). "Unnarration," she defines as "the narrator's assertion that what happened cannot be rendered in narrative" (230), with "the unnarratable as the ineffable, that which cannot be told" (230), thus left to the reader's

imagination, but also “a narrative means of indicating that the emotion of the moment transcends representation” (230). In *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, many of the novel’s silences would be deemed “supranarratable.” The gaps and blanks in text resulting from the “unnarrated” (Warhol 222), as illustrated by *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, generate the kinds of nonlinear and atemporal narratives we find in many twenty-first-century fiction and postmodern works.<sup>3</sup>

These gaps and blanks also necessitate that the reader engage in reconstructing the chronology of the story itself. E. M. Forster concedes that readers generally reconstruct a novel’s causal succession of events as well as its chronology, but ordinarily they do so “on the basis of the actual material reality of the text on paper” (Funk 172; Forster 85-100). With *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, as Wolfgang Funk explains, Egan’s readers “first have to determine temporal and causal connections between the thirteen chapters which constitute the novel’s enunciation” before they can construct the novel’s chronology of events (173). Here readers must make the connections between the characters and book’s timeline, putting readers in the role of plotting or reconstructing the novel, themselves narrativizing the story. Funk concedes that “[t]he narratological focus of Egan’s book is not first and foremost on the reconstruction of the story” (172-73). Its narratological focus is more closely aligned with the disruption of temporal order – the disruption of story time in relation to narrative time – or the upending of a conventional narrative structure, which dislocates a reader in the conventional time or Genette’s “(pseudo-) time of the narrative” (35). Wayne C. Booth argues for the author’s “doctoring of the raw chronology of events with quite a different chronology of telling,” reordered in the service of “*the transforming vision of [the] storyteller*” (436). Egan’s juxtaposition of these two temporal strands and the resultant gaps in the narrative heighten the novel’s thematic aims. The unnarrated in *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, as I will show, illustrates the ways in which storytelling is either not viable or beyond

the capacity of some of Egan's narrators.

### **Narrativization, Storytelling, and Silence in Egan's Early Novels**

I begin by examining Egan's early novels to explore their interest in storytelling and to illuminate the possibilities and potentialities narrativization affords her narrators. This will enable us to consider where and how *A Visit from the Goon Squad*'s narrators, by contrast, struggle to narrativize their lives through storytelling, buttressing our understanding of both the limitations to storytelling in the novel and the role played by Egan's aesthetic of the gap.

But, first, what does it mean for characters to narrativize their lives in the context of the fictional world, and what precisely is "narrativization"? William Labov employs the term "natural narrative," used in linguistic literature of discourse analysis, to convey "naturally occurring" or conversational storytelling, a concept that Monika Fludernik builds upon for her term "natural narratology" (Labov, Fludernik, *Towards a "Natural" Narratology* 13-14). Hayden White uses "storification" to describe the ways in which historians shape historical material into narrative form (6-7). My use of "narrativization" falls between the two, exemplifying the modes of storytelling in which the characters engage as they narrativize their own lives within the context of the narrative frame of the novel. What I am calling "re-narrativization," or "re-storying," reflects the ways in which Egan's characters reshape or attempt to reshape their own lives within the fictional world of the novel. Whether this agency in the form of re-narrativization is fully operationalized by her characters, I will take up again in due course. This in turn will relate to the study of the "unnarrated" and the limitations of storytelling within *A Visit from the Goon Squad*.

Egan's earlier works are also marked by an interest in storytelling: in *The Invisible Circus*, Wolf's storytelling about his girlfriend Faith becomes the primary vehicle for Phoebe's understanding of the events leading to her sister's death; in *Look at Me*, the former model Charlotte Swenson co-authors and sells her own story in a form of self-commodification; and in *The Keep*, storytelling takes form in the inmate Ray, haunted by the death of Danny, his protagonist, writing the story of that event in his prison writing class while we readers are reading it (Reilly 444). In these novels, Egan highlights modes of storytelling that foreground the redemptive capacity of storytelling. In *The Keep*, Egan's contemporary gothic exploration of technology and modern life, Ray's prison instructor Holly, who has been helping the men write their stories, dives into the Imagination Pool at the novel's close, in symbolic rebirth, illustrating her capacity to rebuild and "re-story" her own life. In *The Invisible Circus*, Phoebe's journey across Europe, in search of her own form of transcendence, enables her to "re-story" her sister's death, allowing for a sense of closure, even while Wolf has not been "wash[ed] clean" (338). Curiously, in *Look at Me*, Moose, the story of the young Charlotte's uncle, cannot be "re-storied": he can narrativize history (in writing the historical narrative of his town), but lacks agency and capacity to re-narrativize his own life or, as Egan puts it, "Moose and his ilk were not part of the great glittering future that everyone seemed to believe was now upon them; they crouched in its cracks, its interstices" (484). Charlotte, for that matter, has sold her identity and transferred it: "I hadn't transformed," she observes, "I had undergone a kind of fission, and the two resulting parts of me reviled each other" (511-12). Storytelling in these earlier works – if questioned and sometimes ambiguous – nonetheless offers new possibilities for Egan's narrators, suggesting that, if not always a fully redemptive process, storytelling is at least a regenerative one.



## Narrativization, Gaps, and “The Pause” in *A Visit from the Goon Squad*

In *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, Egan seeds this theme of narrativization in the book’s opening chapter, “Found Objects,” when Sasha recounts for the therapist, Coz, an episode in which she has stolen a woman’s wallet. Through counseling, Sasha seeks to reimagine, retell, and thus “re-story” her life narrative; she and Coz were “writing a story of redemption, of fresh beginnings and second chances” (9). Egan sets up Sasha’s recounting expressly as a story: “Sasha usually looked at the window, which faced the street, and tonight, as she continued her story, was rippled with rain” (5). At the session’s close, “[t]here was a pause, during which Sasha was keenly aware of Coz behind her, waiting. . . . They sat in silence, the longest silence that had ever passed between them” (18-19). Within Sasha’s attempts to “re-story,” Egan has placed both pauses and silences. Storytelling, it would seem, can emerge out of the silence. Sasha wants to be able to say that “[i]t was a turning point; everything feels different now. . . . I’ve changed!” (19). But redemption escapes her – at least, at the present moment. In a pivotal exchange with Coz, Sasha refuses to speak: “More than once, Coz had tried to connect the plumber to Sasha’s father, who had disappeared when she was six, but Sasha was careful not to indulge this line of thinking. ‘I don’t remember him,’ she said, ‘I have nothing to say’” (8-9).

Sasha’s silences will become the subject of the novel’s penultimate chapter and represent a key element of “the unnarrated” in the novel. In the opening chapter, “the pause” – mentioned in conjunction with Sasha’s silence – serves a thematic function, whereas in the book’s twelfth chapter, in PowerPoint form, “Great Rock and Roll Pauses by Alison Blake,” Egan utilizes both silences and pauses within the narrative structure itself. Sasha’s refusal to

narrate will be repeated (as a thematic concern), and “the pause” will become both a thematic concern and a structural form, in which pauses in the narrative result in silences in the work. The series of PowerPoint slides illuminates also the world of Sasha’s family: Drew, Sasha, Alison, and Lincoln in relationship with one another. Sasha urges Drew to engage with their son Lincoln’s fixation on “the pause,” while Drew struggles to understand his son’s current obsession: “Lincoln, before you play another song, I – I’d love to know why the pauses matter so much to you” (286). Lincoln does not hear him; his father just keeps asking, “Okay, Linc, but I’m asking you –” (286). This represents a structural “pause.” Sharon Solwitz sees these pauses as central to the novel: the PowerPoint, “which calls attention to pauses, is itself a kind of pause in the narrative”; indeed, “the *idea* of pause, combined with the author’s *use* of pause – of the intentional gap in time – is . . . Egan’s ‘methodological signature’” (606). Egan herself insists: “This book is all about pauses” (“An Interview with Jennifer Egan”).

Egan’s experimental format in Chapter 12 represents a radical departure in a literary work and is a powerful vehicle for narrating the lives (or resuming “paused” narratives) of two key characters from earlier in the work: Sasha and Drew Blake, the college sweetheart she reunites with sometime after her return from Naples (at a date Egan leaves unspecified). The chapter consists exclusively of illustrations of PowerPoint slides, one per page, 75 pages in total, representing the book’s longest discrete section. Set in 202- (throughout the novel, Egan indicates the precise year only with a hyphen), the chapter represents a proleptic leap structurally and takes place in the California desert, a setting that is itself representative of a gap in landscape form – a landscape in which the relative absences of mountains, trees, and rivers serve as defining features. As Alison notes, “[t]he whole desert is a pause” (295).

Narrating her brother’s relationship to “the pause” in “Great Rock and Roll Pauses,” Alison tells a parallel narrative about her “Mom’s ‘Art,’” which uses found objects, echoing both the title from the novel’s opening chapter and its theme. Only now these objects “come

from our house and lives. / She says they're precious because they're casual and meaningless. / But they tell the whole story if you really look" (273). The objects themselves generate a story, even if not expressed in oral form. Arguably, Sasha's "re-writing" of her story, though unachieved at the close of "Found Objects," may reach its rightful conclusion in this chapter. Funk puts this another way: "It is not only through Sasha's objects, however, that life stories are to be (re)constructed in the novel" (173); although Funk does not use the term "re-narrativization," his comment suggests the process of (and potential for) reconstruction through narrative that Egan is articulating. In these slides, Alison attempts to reconstruct the narrative of her mother's life that Sasha resists narrating on her own – in fact, resists telling her daughter. Below is an example of Sasha's "unnarrated" story through an incident narrated by Alison:

Mom Sits on the Edge of My Bed

"I want to know every bad thing you've done," I say. "Including dangerous and embarrassing."

I stare at her and she looks away.

"You can't," Mom says. (269)

As with Coz, Sasha refuses to speak on her own behalf; however, this time, we understand her resistance to be the expression of appropriate parenting skills. Through her PowerPoint, Alison attempts to reconstruct and understand her parents' histories: Arnaud Schmitt recognizes that it serves as Alison's "journal," where she tries to interpret her parents' silences (80). Schmitt notes the metaphor of the white slide and that the "blanc" indicates the blank in conversation as well as in the story (80): "The issue of the 'white' is central, as it refers both to the absence of *written words* about which Sasha complains and to the *blanks* in the story of Alison's parents that the teenage girl tries to fill (another absence of words)"

(81). Alison represents musical pauses in Rock and Roll through her PowerPoint while simultaneously narrating the silences in her own family -- here again pointing us to the “unnarrated.”

Egan establishes “gaps” in this chapter, then, that are both thematic and structural, utilizing the visual dimension of the PowerPoint to illustrate the gaps physically on the page through separate bubbles of dialogue. These gaps evoke concomitantly other gaps between what Sasha knows about her own story and what she is willing to share with her daughter; between Sasha’s life and her (often absent) physician husband; between the father, Drew, and his autistic son; and, by implication, between Sasha and her previous life, due to her parenting – all set against the backdrop of the gaps in rock and roll music that Alison is explaining on Lincoln’s behalf. Schmitt observes that Alison is narrating more than her mother’s life history in the slides: “Playing with the metaphor of the *white* and the void [in Alison’s slide, “A Pause While We Stand on the Deck”] results in a title and an empty bubble. Each family member cultivates his/her own blanks, spares his/her words, and tries to dissimulate his/her pains” (81).

Rather than these gaps functioning as evasions of narrative, they signify attempts to represent the silences emerging from the gaps. Moling, who locates signifiers of punk’s “authenticity” in the novel, offers this consideration:

These pauses emerge as the blanks of Richard Hell’s definitive anthem of punk youth, “Blank Generation.” The song’s chorus declares, “I belong to the Blank Generation / I can take it or leave it each time,” with Hell omitting the word “blank” every second time. This pause is an invitation to creatively fill the void left by obsolete cultural forms. . . . By composing the chapter in PowerPoint slides, Egan not only explores new means of creative expression,

but also seeks to locate artistic potential in the very “blankness” of today’s digital world. (65)

Moling suggests that Egan utilizes “punk time” to “evade straightforward narrative chronology” as a strategy for subverting time, acknowledging too the non-linear narrative that results from the use of the PowerPoint bubbles, which in turn create more suspension of chronology (65). He highlights the creative potential that emerges from “the void” of the “blank” and reminds us that creative expression inevitably “creatively fills” a void. It could be said that Alison is trying to articulate or narrativize her own story as well as that of her family out of this “void.” The gaps suggest absence, yet a presence—and a silence—remains. That Egan utilizes this strategy illustrates her aesthetic of the gap: her strategic deployment of the gap demonstrates the ways her characters are limited in their capacity to narrate – this use of the gap becomes exemplary of the unnarrated in her work.

Egan’s distinctive forms of the unnarrated are noted by Danica van de Velde, if obliquely. While, like Moling, she argues that the chapter’s “emphasis on silence and suspension of closure” is focused on “the overarching metaphor designed to represent the threatening presence of all that is lost in the passage of time” (123), she also cites the pauses “not just as a musical metaphor, but also as a representation of gaps, silences, and the traumatic shifts in time experienced by the characters” (132). The PowerPoint, she argues, “holds an important function in transcending the constraints of the written form” (132). She recognizes the novel’s “temporal . . . suspension” and the “number of narrative threads untied and unresolved, whereby the reader is left to dwell in the ellipses of the text” (132-33). Here van de Velde is pointing to the unnarrated – and Egan’s aesthetic of the gap – as illustrating the failure of storytelling to provide the missing elements of the narrative. Yet van de Velde’s emphasis is on language; the novel’s final chapter, “Pure Language,” she argues, extends the breakdown in language apparent in the PowerPoint chapter, for it “portrays the future as a

space in which expression has been simplified to a ridiculous point of abstraction” (133). I would argue that language’s limitation is not exclusively at fault here. Both van de Velde and Moling raise useful points about the role of the gap in isolating themes pertaining to time, nostalgia, and punk music; but they fail to recognize fully or explore the gap as it relates to storytelling and its limitations. A closer examination of “the pause” and excerpts from the PowerPoint itself will enable a clearer consideration of what, precisely, is failing here within the storytelling dimension of this chapter and what this means about the limitations of storytelling in the novel as a whole.

First, to examine what Egan is doing in this chapter, I review the notion of “the pause” as illustrative of Egan’s aesthetic of the gap. Up to this point, the novel has featured significant gaps in both story time and narrative time. There are gap years, gap moments, broader stops and starts – akin to a tape being stopped, fast-forwarded, or rewound – illustrating the analog music whose loss the narrators bemoan in this now-digitized music culture (the “Stop/Go Sisters” epitomize the struggle to survive in the new digital age). The PowerPoint chapter explores more overtly the novel’s concept and central theme of “the pause.” What is not said in the PowerPoint slides becomes as significant to the story as what is. Silence not only creates the gap that stories can fill, but it also signifies. For instance, in the slide, “Mom’s Reasons for Not Talking About that Time” (267), Lincoln announces Egan’s strategy with this structural technique: “This is unique, because the pauses happen when there’s *no rest in the music*. They’re just second-long interruptions – . . . It sounds like there’s a gap in the recording but it’s intentional!” (284). He is keenly concerned with the pause in relation to the music’s apparent “end”; Sasha, whispering to Drew, anticipates the pause that will be final: “The pause makes you think the song will end. And then the song isn’t really over, so you’re relieved. But then the song does actually end, because every song ends, obviously, and THAT. TIME. THE. END. IS. FOR. REAL” (289).

But what precisely does the silence or pause in the Rock and Roll music – that is, the musical pauses as representative of the metaphorical pauses in Alison’s family story – mean? And how does it contribute to Egan’s thematic aims of story and narrativization? Alison aims to reconstruct her mother’s narrative, to illustrate her mother’s silence in an attempt to break it, and to generate a new narrative about her family. Consider two slides that appear consecutively (308, 309). The first slide illustrates Alison’s relief upon returning home from the desert walk with her dad – a metaphoric journey of their attempt to manage the family’s challenge, particularly her father’s, with Lincoln’s obsession with the “musical pause.” The slide that follows suggests the resolution of the conflict: the father is himself listening and turning to the son for validation of his own version of a “musical pause” or silence. That Drew now seeks out his son in this capacity reflects a reconstruction of the family/story. “[L]et’s stand by the window. Listen with me,” Drew says. With these words, he brings a symbolic end to their conflict and their periodic mutual silence. Curiously, this move toward re-storying grows out of “the pause” in the desert, much like the experience of the narrators in Egan’s earlier works, where silence and the storytelling that emerges from it yield regenerative, if not redemptive, stories – narratives that redeem the lives of her characters – suggesting the possibilities of storytelling.

But what of Sasha’s silence? Ostensibly it is never broken: the chapter is narrated through her daughter and then only as reported speech. In the novel’s final chapter, Sasha is present only in Alex (Sasha’s former lover) and Bennie’s conversation, represented by the young woman they see in the “ashy dark,” who is not fully visible (349). Yet we sense Sasha has “re-storied” her life: she now narrates her life through her artwork – “tiny pieces of their lives,” used constructively, in stark contrast to the items she once stole and left in a pile that “shook under its load of embarrassment” (15). With Sasha, Egan evokes what Erica L. Johnson calls “the unsayable dimensions of such stories” (270). Egan “provokes the reader to

see and ponder the silences she embeds in her texts, because she hinges the very plots of her stories on them” (271). Moreover, Sasha “preserves the storyteller’s prerogative to *not* tell” (274); in so doing, Egan reminds the reader that silence is less a failure in representation than its own representation (274). The PowerPoint chapter “renders the silence *visible*” through Alison’s PowerPoint illustrations, mimetically representing the silences themselves (276) or avoidances, which can cover a silence. Silences in fragmented text can suggest “the failure of language” (Johnson 278). But Egan’s representation of Sasha is less the failure of language than an indication of “the limits of linguistic expression” and a signifying of “the unsaid and the unsayable” (Johnson 278). In the slide “A Long, Empty Stretch of Walking,” Alison discusses with her father the drowning of Rob (Drew and Sasha’s friend), but her father deflects her query (298). The use of “Empty” in the title evokes “the void”; the unsayable here represents a silence in the opposite direction: the question of Sasha’s forgiveness of Drew for Rob’s death, which remains unstated and unresolved. What cannot be said evokes the constraints of narration, implying by extension what cannot be “told” in Sasha’s case – the unnarrated. Egan’s attention to the silences suggests the inevitability of the incomplete narrative, implying too the impossibility of a total narrative. Egan’s characters attempt to reconstruct their stories and, by extension, their lives, in spite of this impossibility. The complete narrative – by extension, the reconstructed life – is the impossible dream. Yet many of her characters strive for it anyway.

### **The Uses of Analepsis, Prolepsis, and the Aesthetic of the Gap**

In this final section, I explore the aesthetic of the gap in the structure of the novel, revealing how the novel’s themes are illustrated through its structure and how Genette’s oppositional



terms break down. The key to understanding how the aesthetic of the gap functions, how it articulates the “unnarrated” – and, by extension, the constraints of storytelling – resides in a close examination of the narratological backbone of the book: how Egan utilizes time and changes in temporality in *A Visit from the Goon Squad* more broadly. I am most interested in Egan’s use of prolepsis and analepsis, but I consider as well how she employs anachrony. Genette’s broader term “anachrony” designates “all forms of discordance between the temporal orders of story and narrative” (40); these are not analepsis or prolepsis, exclusively, but include a wide range of maneuvers that he explores in *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*. Booth, usefully summarizing Genette’s analysis, isolates how chronological breaks function: “There is, first, the ‘reach’ (*portée*) of any temporal break: how far does the narration leap forward or behind a given story moment? There is, second, the ‘extent’ (*amplitude*) of the leap: how much of the story’s duration is covered by the narrative leap . . . ? There is, third, the ‘speed’ (*vitesse*) of the narration in comparison to the pace of the story” (440). But there is also the question of where these “leaps” occur in relation to story time. Mieke Bal has noted that anachrony is a common feature of nearly all novels, suggesting too the essential link between the play with chronology and a novel’s theme (82-83). In juxtaposing these ways of narrating time within the work, Egan calls attention to her novel’s “movement in all directions” (Itzkoff), heightening the theme of time in the work and drawing the reader to consider the gaps in time in the narrative.

Examining the book’s structure will effectively illustrate the novel’s gaps in time. *A Visit from the Goon Squad* opens with Sasha. The following twelve chapters are told from a different point of view (first-person and third-person) and in differing tenses (present or past). One chapter is in second person, one in newspaper format, and one is a PowerPoint presentation. Each chapter is set in a different time and in a different location (San Francisco, Los Angeles, Crandale, Naples, Africa, and an unnamed Latin American country, with the

narrative bookended by chapters set in New York City). Like Marcel Proust in *In Search of Lost Time*, Egan is sparing in her use of dates; they are generally implied through historic events (references to 9/11, the Clinton election), in relation to other dates (“Thirty-five years from now, in 2008”), or through the changes in characters’ ages (“Four years from now, at eighteen”) (64, 84). The end result is a novel without a firm chronology. To illustrate the novel’s “movement in all directions,” I offer a non-directional cycle, with a suggested timeline:



Figure 1.

Non-directional cycle featuring *A Visit from the Goon Squad*'s structure and illustrating gaps in time, flashbacks (FB), flash forwards (FF), shifting points of view (POV), and plot points across the novel's chapters. Side A and Side B refer to the novel's parts, representing the sides of an LP recording.

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As this cycle illustrates, *A Visit from the Goon Squad*'s structure exhibits continual gaps in chronology: in narrative time, the novel begins in the early 2000s, but moves back and forth in time to the 2020s across the book; in chronological time, it ranges from the 1970s to fifty years forward. Egan does not employ even a conventional flashback format, beginning with present time and moving backward in time to fill in the narrative (Bal 84). Instead, characters are introduced by "advance mention": significant protagonists are dropped into an early chapter to be developed as primary characters later in the work (Genette 75-77). Her protagonists' stories are not narrated contiguously. Sasha's story, and that of the other protagonists, is told through gaps and omissions; significant narrative events or actions are implied or filled in through brief mention later in the novel. Sasha emerges as a central character in the work, but not through conventional narrative means.

In "Reconstructing Narration," Funk investigates the novel with "a special focus on this relation between the events on the story level and their representation as narrative" (170). While Funk recognizes the novel's narratological dimensions, his focus remains on the outcome of Egan's narrative structure and, more specifically, on what it asks of the reader. He writes: "Egan explicitly fragments both the chronology of events and the narrative perspective in her novel in order to draw attention to the underlying principle of *plotting* as a

communal and reconstructive effort which requires active participation on the part of the reader” (169). Funk is keenly aware of the novel’s “strategy of reconstructing stories from ostensibly accidental episodes and random objects” (173). Egan develops a discrete set of episodes linked through causal action, but not chronologically (see flow chart). The narrative serves less as a story arc across the entire work than as discrete individual arcs (or “bubbles” as in PowerPoint) in which the action is self-contained yet linked to other events occurring both before and after those events. This is commonly referred to as a “story cycle” (Ingram 13). Just one chapter (or “story”) is devoted to Sasha’s point of view, with only a presence or a conspicuous absence in the others (Solwitz 603). In some chapters, she is merely mentioned: for instance, in Chapter 13, we hear Sasha’s story through Alex’s and Bennie’s recollections, as they stroll past the apartment where she once lived. Here Sasha is defined by her absence. We do not witness first-hand significant aspects of her trajectory. Key developments in the story, such as events that lead Sasha to Naples, occur “off stage” or are missing from the narrative. The novel’s gaps hold essential information. “I want to know what happened between A and B,” Scotty says to Bennie (106); but in the world of *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, the events between A and B are not always narrated. Rather, they are summarized, implied, or suggested – rarely shown. The effect of such radical juxtaposition of story time with narrative time is, again, to emphasize the novel’s gaps in narrative structure, pointing towards the limits of narration.

In discussing “ellipses,” Genette notes “a less strictly temporal kind, created not by the elision of a diachronic section but by the omission of one of the constituent elements of a situation in a period that the narrative does generally cover” (51-52). The omission of Sasha’s presence in the photograph featuring the Conduits illustrates such sidestepping or “paralipsis” (Genette 52). *A Visit from the Goon Squad* is riddled with omissions, marking the degree to which absence remains not simply a narratological device but a thematic presence. The

novel's use of prolepsis might be called extreme, in light of Booth's comment, noted above, about "reach," how far, and why. The most prominent example occurs in Chapter 4, "Safari":

Thirty-five years from now, in 2008, this warrior will be caught in the tribal violence between the Kikuyu and the Luo and will die in a fire. He'll have had four wives and sixty-three grandchildren by then, one of whom, a boy named Joe, will inherit his *lalema*. . . . He'll marry an American named Lulu and remain in New York, where he'll invent a scanning device that becomes standard issue for crowd security. He and Lulu will buy a loft in Tribeca, where his grandfather's hunting dagger will be displayed inside a cube of Plexiglas, directly under a skylight. (65)

This excerpt features an advance mention of Lulu (publicist Dolly's daughter, who replaces Sasha as Bennie's assistant), who later appears in Chapters 8 and 13, where she is sighted with husband Joe at Scotty's performance. Even this Safari interval appears through advance mention, when in Chapter 3, Bennie's mentor Lou tells Jocelyn (his former lover) about the Africa trip with his children. In story time, the event has already taken place, while in narrative time it has not yet occurred. The episode will be told in full in the following chapter. Through analepsis Egan introduces a significant event that she will extend further through radical prolepsis. The effect is to parachute the reader forward in time, calling attention to the effects of time on the characters and to the novel's disruption of story time. It also highlights for the reader that elements of the story have been fully eclipsed in the narrative, creating gaps in the story that will not be filled. Arguably, as Funk has suggested, the reader has to intercede to fill them (172).

Radical prolepsis in the novel is featured elsewhere in "Safari" where Egan places narrative time four years ahead ("Four years from now, at eighteen" 84), then an unspecified number of years ahead ("Mindy is thinking of Albert, as she will periodically" 86). These

examples remain within the novel's narratological time frame, while others do not. Bal analyzes the question in the domain of "distance"; her argument holds for prolepsis as well:

On the basis of "distance" we may distinguish two kinds of anachrony.

Whenever a retroversion takes place completely outside the time span of the primary fabula (or story), we refer to an external analepsis, an external retroversion. . . . If the retroversion occurs within the time span of the primary fabula, then we refer to an internal analepsis, an internal retroversion. If the retroversion begins outside the primary time span and ends within it, we refer to a mixed retroversion. (90)

Uncle Ted's flashback with his niece, the young Sasha, in Michigan illustrates a mixed retroversion in "Goodbye, My Love" (225-28). This chapter does not feature an omniscient point of view (as "Safari" does), but by now, Egan has prepared readers for such flash-forward forays:

On another day more than twenty years after this one, after Sasha had gone to college and settled in New York; after she'd reconnected on Facebook with her college boyfriend and married late (when Beth had nearly given up hope) . . . , [Ted] would step through a living room strewn with the flotsam of her young kids and watch the western sun blaze through a sliding glass door. And for an instant he would remember Naples: sitting with Sasha in her tiny room. (241)

Here Egan closes the proleptic passage with analepsis still within the prolepsis ("he would remember Naples"), effectively jolting us back into the past, with a reminder that the future will include a past, and a sense that a "lost time" will be felt in that future. Mark Currie describes prolepsis as a kind of future orientation, in which the character anticipates a future that will allow her or him to reflect on a past (113): "And for an instant he would remember"

(241). Currie argues further that this “refusal of linearity” and an interest in prolepsis/future orientation may be defining features of contemporary fiction (24). Moling notes that “Egan seeks to illuminate the ‘abstract question’ concerning what a ‘contemporary book about time’ might look like” (53; Egan “Authors@Google”). Such passages reveal Egan’s interest in “time and its workings” (“An Interview with Jennifer Egan”); certainly the novel is representative of a broader contemporary interest in time. As Ursula K. Heise observes, “[t]his notion of a split between alternative temporalities is central to the narrative organization of postmodern novels” (29). Indeed, Egan’s use of prolepsis shows the gaps in time, here again illustrating the novel’s postmodern elements.

As further illustration of these gaps in time, the narrative structure Egan sets up in her early chapters alters at the lynchpin PowerPoint Chapter 12 and the chapter that follows, where Scotty (formerly a band member in the Flaming Dildos with Bennie) performs on the Footprint. Scotty’s mythic concert, relegated swiftly to the past, has been mythologized (“Doesn’t a myth belong to everyone?” 344); the future has arrived: “Alex felt what was happening around him as if it had already happened and he were looking back” (344). The latter two chapters feature few, if any, time references, beyond “202-” in Chapter 12 (243); in the final chapter, we know only that it is set post-9/11 because of the mention of the Footprint (336). Time, then, has become increasingly vague with more abstruse descriptors: “right after the crash” (321); “he’s two years older than me” (exclusively an internal reference) (325). Story segments spill over; Bennie and Alex reference Sasha, but we do not know precisely when, after Scotty’s concert, this exchange happens and how it coincides with Alison’s recounting of her family’s life in the desert (also tagged as taking place in 202-). In these last two chapters of *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, time in the novel bleeds over more excessively than in any other, and the clues are insufficient for analysis to discern when the PowerPoint chapter occurs in relation to the final chapter and to Scotty’s mythic concert on the Footprint.

Richardson describes a time “bleed” as an instance in which “the narrative moves from setting to setting, and invariably the ‘separate’ times and spaces begin to melt or bleed into each other, as the distinctions between each cluster of events begin to collapse, and ‘now’ and ‘then’ no longer signify clearly disparate times” (“Beyond Story” 51). The novel’s temporal structure has grown elastic. Egan’s aesthetic of the gap has morphed into the gap of the conflated: we do not know precisely where time is by the novel’s close or where these characters stand in relation to each other. Story time and narrative time, as distinct strands, have both broken down. But the breaking down of this distinction does not preclude its value or usefulness; its breakdown deliberately defies traditional strategies for depicting time in the novel. As Richardson writes, “anti-mimetic strategies of narration . . . draw attention to the way narratives are constructed and point to the desires that such constructions serve” (“What Is Unnatural Narrative Theory?” 38). In *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, Egan’s construction evinces a narrative comprised of attempts at narrativization, yet offers instead a proliferation of gaps and silences, allowing for a more complex vision of “story”/“re-storying” than her earlier incarnations of this theme. Here in *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, Egan reconceives narrative, suggesting not only impossible (conflated) worlds but impossible (unnarrated) stories.

## **Conclusion**

The breakdown of story time and narrative time in *A Visit from the Goon Squad* also contributes to the book’s open-ended closing or what I will call its “spiral” ending, evincing the novel’s use of “Spiral Time.” Alex and Bennie walk past Sasha’s old apartment – where the novel began, decades earlier – and they now witness a Sasha look-a-like at her door, the



“new Sasha” symbolizing the novel’s next new story and/or proliferating outcome. Curiously, hearkening back to Egan’s earlier novels, this discovery of a new story and proliferating outcome grows out of (relative) silence: “A sound of clicking heels on the pavement punctured the quiet,” as Alex and Bennie peer “for Sasha in the ashy dark. But it was another girl, young and new to the city, fiddling with her keys” (348-49). The symbol of keys and doors evokes the metaphor of possible new worlds, again forecasting the emergence of a new story and storytelling out of the silence and the pause – or the aesthetic of the gap. From this gap, or perhaps through it, Egan offers a spiral closing to her novel – not a full circle precisely, but rather an echo, in advance, of what lies ahead. This reading sheds new light also on our understanding of Egan’s “Black Box,” for in that story, Lulu re-emerges as a central figure, assigned to infiltrate (through body and technology) the world of an operative (of unknown history). I would argue that the emergence of Lulu’s character in “Black Box” represents another “spiral outward” from the original novel, in short, that she represents a critical component of the novel’s next “new” story: another protagonist who, through technological advances, has morphed in form between the old story and the new, illustrating the novel’s forward spiral in time.

Yet how do we reconcile this creation of the next new stories and/or proliferating outcomes alongside a recognition of the “unnarrated”? Is there a link between the “unsaid” and the new possible worlds that Egan has generated at the close of her novel? As Nancy notes in “Elliptical Sense,” drawing on Jacques Derrida’s writings on ellipses, “the text says or it writes or it ellipses something else as well, something we cannot know. It lets us know that we are truly missing something” (186). Regarding the “sense” or meaning in the ellipsed text, Nancy writes: “Only the ellipsis does it, which means: the sense itself *as* ellipsis, as not being circular, not moving around and toward a center, but coming endlessly to the limit – here or there – where the presence ellipses the meaning by coming to its own sense” (186).

By this I understand Nancy to mean that meaning remains through the ellipses' gestures at the things that may not be said. Nancy explores this concept further through the notion of "discerning," which means "only to glimpse or to make out; it is to see, but barely, or to guess" (187). Indeed, Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad* closes with this "glimpse" – with the characters barely seeing the young woman – suggesting limitation in storytelling but also in sight and knowledge. For, in examining what remains unsaid, we find that there is a story that cannot be told, storytelling that elides. Here, if storytelling elides its meaning, knowledge cannot necessarily be discerned – which is why the "unsaid" remains "ferociously important."

University of Salford

a.j.rouverol@salford.ac.uk

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### **Notes**

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1. For provocative discussions of analepsis and prolepsis, see Chatman (32) and Currie (39), respectively.

2. Narratologists differ on the precise use of these terms: see also Brockmeier (357); Fludernik ("Chronology, Time, Tense" 117); and Genette (27).

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3. Examples include works by Mitchell, Water, and a number of novels by Ali Smith; twentieth-century examples include works by Coover, B. S. Johnson, Spark, and Cortázar.

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