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21st-Century Postmodernism:

Time, Capitalism, Multiculturalism, and Storytelling in Three Contemporary Novels

The turn of the 21st century had riddled the world with strife—from the year 2000 phenomenon (otherwise known as Y2K) to modern economic and political uprisings that have forced the world's reckoning with its own dubious morality. In the near quarter of a century that followed authors have adapted accordingly. Often, authors tend to write about what is most important to them as people, and notable authors within the 21st-century post-modernist tradition are no different in this regard. women authors, NoViolet Bulawayo, Zadie Smith, and Jennifer Egan, all decided to write ground-breaking experimental works of fiction in an educational effort to both diversify the English literary canon and test the boundaries of what literary fiction is. All three women have themes in common that connect their works. *We Need New Names* is a novel written by NoViolet Bulawayo in 2013 centered on post-colonial Zimbabwe, the horrifying aftermath of the decolonization of sub-Saharan Africa as well as a child's migration to the United States of America that goes worse than expected. *White Teeth,* from the year 2000 focuses on Archibald Jones, a relatively average man in Great Britain who's faced some rather extraordinary circumstances in his life, and on his friendship with Samad Iqbal and his family, Bengali immigrants to the United Kingdom. *A Visit From the Goon Squad* is a work of fiction, rather than a novel, from 2011in which author Jennifer Egan experiments with various forms of storytelling in what amounts to a rejection of modern mass consumerism and how it sucks humanity dry of its identity.

WE NEED NEW NAMES

In 2013, NoViolet Bulawayo wrote *We Need New Names*. Set in Zimbabwe (even if it's seldom mentioned by name), and divided Fanon-style between a depressed native slum given the rather ironic pseudonym "Paradise" and Budapest, the adjacent settler neighborhood. Paradise is a ravaged country of epidemics and violence, where sexual assault is normalized, and religion is all but abolished. "They did not come to Paradise. Coming would mean that they were choosers" (Bulawayo 52). The "Appearance" in the chapter head specifically refers to relocation; given that the rest of the graph creates a notion that appearance is some ethereal transposition or teleportation, rather than a physical journey of inherently angry and hopeless connotations: the "In swarms, like flies. In angry waves, like a wretched sea" (Bulawayo 52) line implies this. However, the chapter then transitions into a conversation about a lost black stool that, according to the narrator, was "[their] whole history" (Bulawayo 53), and creates a dynamic about what is more important: the past (in this case, the stool), or the future (referenced by the lack of children's clothing on page 53) —perhaps coincidence, or perhaps clever foreshadowing, but the novel goes back a number of times to this concept of the idea of "the West."

In much the same way that natural-born U.S., well, people, would fathom the idea of "the American Dream," Bulawayo points out two facts: a) Immigrants have this dream too of better opportunity, and b) that dream isn't always straightforward, nor is it based in reality. It's not exactly the rose-tinted fantasy that was created when that "pull yourself up by your bootstraps" was first invented, and the narrator Darling's existence as a child forms the center of a *bildungsroman* where circumstance rather than merit is destiny; is just one example of many within Bulawayo's novel where this "pull yourself up by the bootstraps" myth is challenged. For example, Darling (the main character within *We Need New Names)* doesn't really find a better life in DestroyedMichigan (a colloquialized version of Detroit that Bulawayo makes the second half of her novel about), even though her aunt sponsored her migration, and Darling's consistently mispronouncing of Detroit as "Destroyed Michigan" is symbolically apt. Darling's hopes of a better life were both destroyed in Paradise, and, when she has to deal with the realities of being an African-American after her emigration from Paradise, destroyed in Michigan.

Take one example of the way in which this novel revitalizes works of social criticism such as Balzac's *Lost Illusions*. At the beginning of the chapter entitled *Darling on the Mountain*, we see Darling say the following:

> Jesus Christ died on this day, which is why I have to be out here washing with cold water like this. I don't like cold water and I don't even like washing my whole body unless I have somewhere meaningful to go (Bulawayo 17)

Ritual purity and cleansing are inherent parts of many (if not all) of the world's religions, certainly the major ones, and we immediately see a need for cleanliness (or rather an outdated notion of what *cleanliness* is), and how Darling has to adhere to such notions, even if it doesn't make contextual sense, especially given how that paragraph ends.

> She says it's the least we can do because we are all dirty sinners and we are the ones for whom Jesus Christ gave his life, but what I know is that I myself wasn't there when it all happened, so how can I be a sinner? (Bulawayo 18)

Darling is a 10-year-old child but is already questioning religious practices. It’s a profound question when the narrator, a child, poses a question that adults have spent centuries trying to solve. This allows Bulawayo to make Darling the vehicle of the novel, a centerpiece to revolve social critiques around. Children are innocent, and so by their nature are influenced by the circumstances of their social environment. One device that Bulawayo employs to establish this concept is naming conventions. All the characters from the first half of *We Need New Names* have rather anti-Occidental (that is to say, non-Western) sounding names. Darling, Sbho, Stina, Bastard, Godknows–all of these characters are children, and they all have one thing in common–they have one name. Bulawayo makes a clear distinction between the children and the adults in the novel–children have one name, and adults have multiple. But all the names say something about the character's respective personalities. Godknows is a character who tries to act like he knows everything even though he’s a child (acting omniscient), but overall, the kids’ names tend to be rather innocent, compared to the adults' names. Even the kids in America tend to have one name, such as Jim, Elliot, Marina, etc. But the adults have longer names. The most obvious is the Mother of Bones, Darling's caretaker while Darling’s mother is missing in action (coded phrase for “she’s having an affair”) but we also have the town’s pastor, Prophet Revelations Bitchington Mborro, the name serving as a euphemism for the fact that he talks rather loudly and asks people for money (not unlike today’s modern televangelists). What’s interesting about the practice of allegorical naming, however, is the idea that these names and the characters behind them hint at a submerged reality. Darling becomes a victim of her own circumstances, which is perhaps why Bulawayo makes “Darling” the name of the main protagonist (she has a last name, Nonkululeko Nkala, but it’s seldom mentioned). Darling is an innocent child who gets thrust into situations far outside of her control, namely, that her birth mother has an affair while her birth father is in

South Africa, she's relocated across the Atlantic at the behest of her aunt, her friend Chipo was raped by her own grandfather and forced to give birth. And just when Darling thought her life was bound to get better, she learns the grass isn't always greener on the other side of the ocean. It's an analogy for real life, and it's what makes Bulawayo's novel stand out among others. In brief, there isn't a happy ending. Darling is perhaps one of the most real child characters in 21st-century literature precisely because she's not Huck Finn on the river, she's not Sethe from *Beloved*. Darling never escapes the problems that she faces and fails to triumph over her circumstances. In essence, she comes to realize that she is a prisoner of her own reality. The novel thus serves as an analogy for the dystopian state of Zimbabwe post-decolonization.

In the article *"*Kaka country: An Intertextual Reading of National Dysfunction in Bulawayo's We Need New Names and Jinga's One Foreigner's Ordeal", authors and literary critics Esther Mavengano and Muchativugwa L. Hove make the argument that Bulawayo inspired much of her novel on the rather dystopian state of Zimbabwean fiction (and while the novel itself doesn't immediately reveal its first setting (which takes roughly half of the book), as Zimbabwe, that fact becomes startlingly clear as the novel progresses. The first chapter is aptly named Hitting Budapest–Budapest both being a European capital and the fictional upscale neighborhood of Bulawayo's unnamed African country. The nomination is not random. Around the time Bulawayo wrote *We Need New Names*, Victor Orban, a rather right-wing authoritarian whose xenophobia launched him to the top of Hungarian politics, became the head of state in Hungary. He "hit Budapest" as the chapter's title indicates. But what's especially interesting about Bulawayo's choice is that she didn't pick England as the oppressive European state, particularly given the rather messy geopolitical history that England has as the former colonizers of Rhodesia (what is modern-day Zimbabwe). But what's even more potent is *where* that phrasing is used, namely at the beginning of the novel when Godknows and the rest of the main cast of characters are attempting to leave Paradise (the ironically named slum in which Darling resides) but isn't used again until roughly the midpoint of the novel and is only used three times in general. The second time comes in the later chapter named *Blak Power* (purposely misspelled) "I don't care, I'm going. I'm not even hitting Budapest anymore, Godknows says" (Bulawayo 83). The argument that "the grass isn't always greener on the other side" isn't new either. In *"*New names, Translational subjectivities: (Dis)location and (Re)naming in NoViolet Bulawayo's We Need New Names, author Polo Belina Moji suggests that Bulawayo wrote *We Need New Names* as a rejection of the notion that migration is analogous to just a simply a cultural translation.

We Need New Names depicts a cycle of displacements and ruptured kinships, starting with the forced removal of Darling's marginalized community from the shanty town of her childhood, which leads to the migration of her father to Johannesburg and her own eventual sponsored immigration to America. "Satirical irony is used as a narrative mode that frames Darling's subjectification in terms of the psychic and social (dis)location brought about by these displacements. This reflects the semantic and cognitive dissonance created by shifts in ways of experiencing and naming the world." (Moji 182).

An example of this concept, and perhaps the most blatantly obvious one, comes in the *Angel* chapter, when Darling is getting used to going to school in the United States. She says the following:

> But then because you have to do all this, when you get to the final step, something strange has happened to you, and you speak the way a drunk walks. And because you are speaking like falling, it's as if you are an idiot when the truth is that it's the language and

> the whole process that's messed up. And then the problem with those who speak only English is this: they don't know how to listen; they are busy looking at your falling instead of paying attention to what you are saying. I have decided the best way to deal with it all is to sound American, and the TV has taught me just how to do it. It's pretty easy; all you have to do is watch Dora the Explorer, The Simpsons, SpongeBob, Scooby-Doo, and then you move on to That's So Raven, Glee, Friends, Golden Girls, and so on, just listening and imitating the accents. If you do it well, then before you know it, nobody will ask you to repeat what you said. (Bulawayo 133-134)

Her concept of reality is entirely dependent on what Darling seems to understand as a metafictional interpretation of Western culture. What's even more interesting here is that it also moves beyond simple racial dichotomy. The shows that Darling describes have all sorts of leads to them: *SpongeBob* and *The Simpsons* are obviously animated shows with anthropomorphic characters, while *That's So Raven* is a show with a Black female lead, and obviously, there are white leads in shows like *Glee* and the *Golden Girls.* What all of these have in common, however, and where Darling's rather metafictional realization comes from, is that they're not only stereotypically Western, but they're also Western stereotypes. And Darling realizes, even as a child, forced out of her shantytown in Zimbabwe, that she will never fit into this world, no matter how hard she tries, a failure to fit in that mirrors Bulawayo's own experience as a migrant from Zimbabwe.

Bulawayo set out to write *We Need New Names* with the intention of dispelling utopian African Fiction. Moji makes this comparison, too,

> Bulawayo describes the difference between Darling's childhood and her own as two different Zimbabwes. Hers being a successful newly independent nation-state while

> Darling's Zimbabwe, a country in crisis, serves as a reminder that this 'original' Zimbabwe is no more” (Moji 185)

We Need New Names is itself laced with rather heavy topics, from rape and sexual assault to immigration and racial violence. At the center of this narrative lies a sub-teen main character, Darling, who’s just 10 years old when we first are introduced to her and ends the novel not that much older than 13. In a country like the United States, where book banning is becoming more commonplace (see recent efforts to ban books with LGBTQ themes in Texas, Tennessee, etc.), building a bildungsroman around such a character involved in such complexities of human existence is a daring task, one Bulawayo decides to write despite the criticism of this sentiment. Take this line from the eponymous chapter *We Need New Names* when Darling begins to question her own identity:

> Maybe she was born just different, maybe God couldn’t decide to make her black or white or even albino. We are still reading Forgiveness for now, but we let her come today because Sbho and I need an extra person since Chipo herself cannot help (Bulawayo 55)

We’re given the first glimpses into Darling’s perception of the world. Darling is a rather observant main character (a sentiment shared with at least one other literary critic, Jim Hannan of *World Literature Today*, "Written with kinetic energy that crackles with life, NoViolet Bulawayo’s debut novel should be read by anyone interested in emerging voices in world literature. At times joyful, funny, melancholic, ferocious, and defiant, Bulawayo’s first-person narrator, Darling, is a trenchant observer of the human condition" (Hannan 1)

This raises the question of whether the naming choice wasn’t deliberate. Multiple critics have suggested that Bulawayo wrote her characters with non-Anglican names specifically because they weren’t white, but to this end, there’s a second purpose for it, namely, that the nomenclature is yet another example of Darling's innocence in a world where she realizes is increasingly cruel to her. This separates Bulawayo from authors of earlier bildungsroman novles like William Golding (author of the 1954 novel *Lord of the Flies*). Whereas Golding's characters are more or less presented to the reader as inherently aware of the world's cruelty (harking to Golding's own subscription to Hobbesian philosophy), Darling and her friends/confidants aren't. They're just kids in an increasingly cruel world of drugs, crime, racism, and sexual assault. But Bulawayo succeeds where Golding didn't, creating a narrative in which circumstances drive the plot, in an increasingly unsuccessful, no matter how good-hearted attempt to shield her characters from those circumstances.

WHITE TEETH

Another author who follows the 21st-century postmodernist movement is Zadie Smith, and her debut novel from the year 2000, *White Teeth.* White Teeth is a novel about anything but white teeth, white teeth are considered the standard, the ordinary, the default, to put it mildly. But Smith sets out to write a novel that fundamentally challenges the mundane.

> But Archie did not pluck Clara Bowden from a vacuum. And it's about time people told the truth about beautiful women. They do not shimmer down staircases. They do not descend, as was once supposed, from on high, attached to nothing other than wings. Clara was from somewhere. She had roots. More specifically, she was from Lambeth (via Jamaica) and she was connected, through tacit adolescent agreement, to one Ryan Topps. Because before Clara was beautiful, she was ugly. (Smith 30-31)

The quotation raises several questions. Does society prize women as objects, and does that objectification say something about British culture? (Spoiler, yes, and yes.) There's an immediate sense of bluntness and direction, both about women and to a greater extent, social minorities in general, something that Smith doesn't hesitate to bring to the forefront (even if her following critique comparing Clara's ex-husband, Ryan Topps, too, as Smith puts it, "Hitler's Napoleonic ambitions" is rather daft and a definite apples-to-oranges comparison). As the scene puts it, Clara (much like the rest of us) doesn't operate in the vacuum that society seemed to put them in. There is a level of "Britishness" to each of these characters, and Archie, rather than being the comparison point only to Clara, or Samal Iqbal, is also a comparison point to upper-class posh British society (yes, even the hobnobbers). Archie thus serves as a middle point–he's proof that much of society's race struggles are class struggles with the window dressing of race manipulation. Even though racism is real and common, it's simply a masking for the differences in class–particularly in an increasingly multicultural Great Britain.

This beginning of chapter 2 relates a plotline that is central to the rest of the novel, namely, binaries. One deliberate choice that Smith makes that would-be predecessors of hers (take Toni Morrison for example) didn't is the direct tone. For all of Morrisons's successes, she spoke far more in allegories than she did in direct English prose. For example, take the beginning of *Sula* (arguably one of Toni Morrison's most important novels):

> In that place, where they tore the nightshade and blackberry patches from their roots to make room for the Medallion City Golf Course, there was once a neighborhood. It stood in the hills above the valley town of Medallion and spread all the way to the river. It is called the suburbs now, but when black people lived there it was called the Bottom. (Morrison 1)

This beginning operates on a binary assumption that nightshade and blackberries are symbols. Morrison anticipates the reader understands that nightshades can be toxic while blackberries are a plant that produces a nourishing fruit. Sure, it’s a literal description of land-grabbing, (there’s a symbolism here that suggests the destruction of something flourishing) but it still tends to beat around the bush by using the nightshade and blackberry analogy, and more importantly, given how early in *Sula* that comes in, expects the reader to understand an analogy that may not be immediately obvious. A poisonous plant and a nourishing fruit are allegories for the positive and negative elements in every community, including the now-displaced African American community that once occupied the Bottom and nonetheless remains on the bottom. Morrison fills her writing with richly suggestive connotations.

In contrast, Smith jumps right into what she expects the reader to understand about her main characters, literally within the first paragraph. Archie Jones is an older Englishman with a (frankly) common White name, that he’s a mediocre man living a life of mediocrity, a theme that comes up plenty of times within the novel), and perhaps the most important thing here–that he didn’t “pick Clara Bowden out of a vacuum,” and that’s important since one running theme throughout the novel is that interactions between people of various origins don’t exist within the “everyone is equal” vacuum that we’d rather operate in. Much like in *We Need New Names,* Smith’s characterization of the neoliberal world is theoretical, or at least makes theoretical promises that it either later does or doesn’t keep. "She's not beautiful so she’s ugly.” We later find out that Clara broke her two front teeth in an accident as a younger person and probably only married Archie solely so she could experience marriage. This raises questions about whether society forces marriage for the sake of it, as well as speaks to the social pressures in Britain for women to be wed; their happiness thus takes second precedence behind their marital status.

We see just how mediocre Archie is in an argument put forward by author Grace Kyungwon Hong. The first chapter of Hong's book *Global Migration, Social Change and Cultural Transformation* speaks to Zadie's Smith's *White Teeth.* Archie is a character that, without hesitation, decided history by a flip of a coin. Take the opening paragraph, for instance:

> Archie Jones, one of the many hapless heroes of Zadie Smith's novel *White Teeth* (2000), faces a decision of epic proportions. As a seventeen-year-old English soldier during World War II, he finds himself alone in the Bulgarian woods with perhaps the most iconic representation of twentieth-century evil: a Nazi collaborationist doctor whose expertise in genetics and whose participation in the "internal German matters" regarding "the sterilization program" and the "euthanasia policy" (WT, 90), hints at the darkest and most horrifying kinds of human experimentation. Should Archie kill this man, this representative of the amoral nadir of human existence, a man who routinely and casually decided who should live and who should die? Yet in so doing, Archie would become the very thing he is destroying. (Hong 1)

Immediately, we get some context. Zadie Smith gives us a character faced with a life-altering choice, and possibly a history-altering one: either kill the Nazi doctor or live long enough to let him manipulate humanity. But, as Hong elaborates, Archie doesn't have the faculties to elaborate on such a decision, nor the concern to act decisively on those choices. Archie's inconsistency becomes a recurring facet of the story. Smith, for what this is worth, doesn't pretend that Archie has those faculties, either. One thing that both Zadie Smith and Bulawayo allow for is a protagonist that really isn't a protagonist in the traditional sense. In Bulawayo's book, it's an innocent child in Darling, while in Smith's we have Archie Jones, a rather common middle-aged Brit. But in both, the characters are real and surrounded by other, real characters, and thus the authors don’t have to provide a justification for their actions; rather, these are implicit to their character. To go back to the Toni Morrison example, Sethe (the main character of *Beloved*) was a complicated main character, but we understand that she was a justified protagonist because she was a slave who didn’t want to see her children sold off into slavery, and thus feels guilt about killing her own daughter. In other words, Sethe is a character the reader can sympathize with by her actions and her circumstances. In these novels, however, that justification isn’t present, but for different reasons. In *We Need New Names,* there doesn’t have to be one (since we’ve all been children, and the book operates out of a child’s eyes) and in *White Teeth,* we’re supposed actively to dislike the protagonist (even if we don’t hate them). Archie Jones is an incredibly unlikeable character. He’s a man that, as Hong argues, has become lost in the mundane reality that was the end of 20th-century Great Britain. “Archie’s actions during it have become completely irrelevant at this point: “Nothing he did *then* mattered *now*” (Smith 12, Hong 1). In other words, Archie is as real as he is unlikeable. But it’s the fact that his supposed knowledge should ALLOW him to make those decisions is the point that Smith questions–does society disincentivize destiny-altering decisions? Should Archibald have been aware of the consequences of his actions? And more importantly, should we hold Archie responsible for the lives that he could’ve saved had he made the right decision?

In the article, “Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth*: The Interpellation of the Colonial Subject in Multicultural Britain”, author and literary critic Sercan Hamza Bağlama speaks a lot to Smith using Great Britain's multiculturalism as a literary device.

> The novel, through the represented experiences of its characters, examines the projection of the private sphere to the public level in contemporary Britain, including the concept of Britishness as a politically constructed category. Analyzing the represented experiences

> of the characters might, for that reason, help expose specific dimensions of the totality of real life and articulate economic, cultural, and political histories in Britain in the twenty-first century. (Bağlama 1)

Given that a lot of praise has been thrust upon Smith for this phenomenon, Bağlama's comments shouldn't come off as a surprise. When we look at the cast of characters in *White Teeth,* it becomes far clearer as to what each character represents–as explained earlier, Archie's relatively mundane, middle-aged British lifestyle is marred by a quagmire created by his decision to spare a key Nazi doctor during WWII; this is also true for the other characters in the novel as well. Clara, for example, is just as mundane, but perhaps the most realistic character, in that she's trapped in a loveless marriage to a man far older than her, seemingly for the only relative purpose to be married in the first place. Then there are the Chalfens, a white, middle-class, educated family that is the paradigm of ostensible Britishness, or so they think they are. Both Bağlama and critic Irene Perez Fernandez bring this point up,

> The Chalfen family is presented as being the true incarnation of Britishness: white, middle-class, and educated. The Chalfens' representation suggests that they have internalized the idea of "Britishness" and "belonging." (Fernandez 147)

What's interesting here, is that as Fernandez points out when the Chalfens meet Millat (Samad's son), their first words to him are "you look very exotic" (Smith 273). Now, one likely doesn't need an Oxford English Dictionary to make the conclusion that Joyce Chalfen, when she said this, was immediately assuming that Millat doesn't belong in Britain, not least because of the dialogue that followed this exchange. "Yes, yes, of course, but where originally? All the Chalfens milling through the kitchen, Marcus, Josh, Benjamin, Jack, exploded into laughter" (Smith 273). It's not exactly an original sentiment, and perhaps is racism in its purest form, but why this line is so important to *White Teeth's* narrative is because it has largely split critics as to what Smith's point really was.

Again, both Bağlama and critic Irene Perez Fernandez bring up this sense of multiculturalism but disagree as to what the primary cause of it really was. Take this for example. In Baglama's piece, the author talks about how the immigrants are "unable to assimilate" In the novel, the immigrant characters are unable to participate in the decision-making processes of the state/public life, to feel confident due to dislocation, interpersonal mistrust, excessive competition, cultural insignificance, and lack of a stable identity, and to become integrated into the mainstream society (Bağlama 81). She talks repeatedly about how characters feel alienated (which was seen in the interactions between the Chalfens and Millat) but what Bağlama misses is that the Chalfens aren't just a juxtaposition to Samad Iqbal and his family, but to Archie and Clara as well. Archie is just an ordinary white dude (almost quite literally), yet the Chalfens are this rich type that one probably pictures when they are told to "picture a British family." This is where Smith's novel bears similarities to *We Need New Names.* Both have an idealized version of what their main characters should strive to be—*We Need New Names* has the American Dream, while *White Teeth* has the Chalfens. The Chalfens, although minor characters, serve as the perfect foils of the mass consumerism that was already starting to take off in 2000 when *White Teeth* was published–the rich, well-to-do Brits who don't see anything outside of their coveted circle. It's a tale that's likely as old as society itself—posh people who are whiter than White Teeth. whose image is carefully curated to only show the best of their lives with zero empathy for anyone else. (sound familiar, like what social media would become?) But the Chalfens' inclusion as antagonists combined with the fact that it's Archie who makes friends with Samad, not the rich people, and the fact that Archie and Samad are the main characters, that make *White Teeth* far more about culture and class struggle than about institutional racism. The novel has elements of that too, but Archie and Samad bond over their shared struggles, not their shared successes. Just as we saw in Bulawayo's work, assimilation is a struggle, but unlike in Bulawayo's work, Smith posits that recognizing each other's struggles is the success of identity, and that modern mass consumerism and a desire to sit in the background is what has led to oppression. This brings us to another work (since it's not categorically a novel) published in between *White Teeth* and *We Need New Names*, namely, Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad*.

A VISIT FROM THE GOON SQUAD

In 2011, American author Jennifer Egan wrote *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, a work that straddles the line between the novel and compilation genres. Much as *We Need New Names* was a rejection of Western commercial optimism and *White Teeth* a rejection of British Imperialism and traditional British poshness in favor of a multicultural U.K., Jennifer Egan's story is a rejection of the command of destiny, a common idea that suggests that life has a set path that we, as humans, inherently control. Egan's work is split up into various stories that center upon many characters, all of whom have some relation to Bennie, a man of the music business, and Sasha, his assistant. What's immediately noteworthy here, even without the plot details, is how Egan manipulates the classical fiction format. Rather than taking a cue from *White Teeth* by being a novel that challenges racial norms, nor like its later counterpart in *We Need New Names*, which challenges literary norms regarding naming conventions (or at least Western naming conventions), but rather is a novel that challenges plot and story setup conventions and by doing so, creates an illusion of time, Egan's novel critiques consumerism and the colonization of time.

The article *No Future: Time, Punk Rock and Jennifer Egan's A Visit from the Goon Squad*, written by Arizona literary critic Martin Moling, focuses on both Egan's manipulation of time, and specifically the chapter "Great Rock and Roll Pauses. As Moling notes, the chapter is a set of Powerpoint Slides. "Great Rock and Roll Pauses" presents another poignant attempt to "stop time within time." This chapter, which is set in the Californian desert of the 2020s and told from the perspective of Sasha's twelve-year-old daughter, Allison, is composed of PowerPoint slides" (Moling 57). These slides are disjointed, and frankly speak about how Lincoln (Allison's brother) notices pauses in each song. What's notable about this is just how different it sets apart from mostly any other chapter that precedes it. There's no text in the chapter itself, and it's a completely new experimental form. In doing so, Egan brings to the forefront discussions about time and how valuable it is, both to the reader and to the characters within the story.

Take the chapter "Selling the General" for instance. In Egan's largest indictment to capitalism (or at least modern mass consumerism), this chapter examines failed publicist Dolly and her daughter Lulu (who, at the end of the collection/story, replaces Sasha as Benny's assistant) are natural extensions of characterization. Two immediate characterizations come to fruition, the first being the materialism that Dolly subjects the general (her client) to, and the second being the fact that both Dolly and Lulu only refer to each other by first name (namely, the idea that Lulu doesn't call her mother some variation of mother).

> Dolly's first big idea was the hat. She picked teal blue, fuzzy, with flaps that came down over the general's large dried-apricot ears. The ears were unsightly, Dolly thought, and best covered up. (Egan 116)

Much as the media industry became a world of aesthetics over quality, Dolly's immediate first thought wasn't that her client was marketable, but rather, what she needed to change to make her client more “marketable". In other words, purely quantitative change. she goes into a literal downward spiral about how much of her client's appearance wasn’t as she instructed, or rather, what would’ve made her client most appealing. This seems incredibly self-absorbed (to the point where Dolly is both ignorant of and a nuisance to her daughter) and rather contrived—as Dolly spends all of her time criticizing the smallest things—the general's hat flops, the tie, the fact that the flops were correlated to cancer risk. But these small nuisances quickly build up, although Dolly seems not to care, we later find out in the chapter that the general is a genocidal dictator (possibly modeled after Moamar Gaddafi; the book makes hints at Gaddafi, but it’s never mentioned to be him explicitly). For example, Dolly herself even questions, for a moment, what she is doing, and then she gets paid and forgets all about it. “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*” (Egan 117).

Once again this reflects the lengths that Dolly would go to keep a career that no longer wants her nor needs her. Money became so important that she compromised the last shred of integrity she had for fame and fortune (or at least a payday). It’s also befitting here that Egan made Dolly a publicist by nature. In what almost seems like Egan predicting the future of social media that would take off in the years since she published *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, Dolly’s need for attention and money drive her to do the nearly unthinkable and ignore the unacceptable. In many ways, it removes her humanity. Given that Egan wrote *A Visit from the Goon Squad* within the vicinity of the 2008 Great Recession, Dolly becomes a caricature of the unhealthy work-life balance that corporate society was increasingly requiring for individual survival.

As literary critic Carl White puts it,

> 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. (White 2)

Timing is essential in Egan's work (even if it isn't necessarily a novel, as White puts it), both to the characters within the work and the real-world implications of the work. Dolly, as aforementioned, is willing to "deal with the devil" essentially by risking whatever ashes remained of her [already scarred] reputation to bog down in a proverbial moral quagmire, and it's here we begin to see the similarities between Egan's work and *White Teeth*. In both works, we have characters that are completely morally bankrupt, or at the very least oblivious enough to the current events surrounding them that they come off as morally devoid. In *White Teeth*, that's Archie not taking out a Nazi doctor that he was imprisoned with during WWII, while in *A Visit from the Goon Squad,* all its characters exhibit these maleficent traits. Everything is connected both to Bennie in some way, shape, or fashion, even if elliptically in, for example, the relatively jaded way that Dolly, Kitty and Lulu all act in *Selling the General*. But it comes back around to the idea that time and modern capitalism are twins of one another. Modern capitalism, unlike its classical counterpart, focuses far more on a trend of mass consumerism that has no doubt left a mark on every person's life.

White makes mention of what became the most famous line in the novel, at the end of the final chapter; the line that gives the work its title. 'Time's a goon, right?'" says record label executive Bennie Salazar to aging slide guitarist Scotty Hausmann in the final chapter of Jennifer Egan's A Visit from the Goon Squad." (White 1) White correctly points out that *A Visit from the Goon Squad* was written in the wake of the 2007/08 financial crisis and is incredibly critical of the aesthetic of capital realism. "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” (White 2). Part of the problem is that White immediately assumes Egan wrote *A Visit from the Goon Squad* to add to a plethora of anti-capitalist literature, when, while Egan herself may believe (keyword here *may)* that capitalism has failed, nothing in her book necessarily dictates that as the central theme. If anything, Egan’s book encourages the values that capitalism allows for, values including creativity, innovation, and testing the boundaries and limits not seen before.

It’s the mass consumerism that Egan is questioning, this endless pursuit of work and hustle culture that compromises our identities, a sentiment enabled by modern capitalism. In other words, White’s mistakes cause for effect here. When Bennie encourages Scotty to play even though it had been four decades since the two played guitar together, it brings up the problem with the reality of work: quantity over quality, both in the labor and the end product. That’s not surprising given that it’s how modern mass consumerism works, and it does not surprisingly end with every character more or less questioning, in some way, shape, or fashion.” Where did the time go?” When that “Time’s a Goon” line is asserted, it’s Bennie proposing it to Scotty, or, in layman’s terms, the executive pushing a guitarist who no longer feels comfort or joy in the work they once loved. A boss pushing a worker, in its simplest form, a reality not entirely devoid of real-world connection today with, for example, politicians looking to push the age to claim retirement benefits further and further back. It makes even more sense when you realize the conversation Dolly and Arc have in *Selling the General,* where Arc informs Dolly that the general isn't happy with the changes she made, and Dolly basically writes him off as not knowing what he wants.

> Dolly went quiet. There were times, listening to Arc's silken monotone, when she'd been sure she'd heard a curl of irony around the words he'd been ordered to say, like he was speaking to her in code. Now there was a prolonged pause. Dolly spoke very softly. "Arc, take scissors and cut the ties off the hat. There shouldn't be a goddamned bow under the general's chin. (Egan 118)

Dolly's first immediate instinct here is to criticize everything about the general's aesthetic, with absolutely no regard for his character, which speaks to the moral bankruptcy of her character. So, what about time? Time itself proves to be both the antithesis of this view of capitalism as well as the antidote to mass consumerism. Take this bit from "*Selling the General"*:

> School was where Lulu's life took place. She'd been adamant about not allowing her mother, who once had been a fixture at Miss Rutgers', to jeopardize Lulu's status with her new disgrace. Nowadays, Dolly dropped Lulu off around the corner, peering past dank Upper East Side stone to make sure she got safely in the door. (Egan 118)

The immediate issue is that Lulu is ashamed of her mother solely because she failed at her job rather than because she's doing publicity work with a genocidal dictator. In a move that seems incredibly reminiscent of Clara's disdain for Archie because of his "average British White man" code of ethics, Lulu exists here to play up the elitist, almost Hollywood-esque levels of conceited nature to its exaggerated conclusion, and even when Lulu asks Dolly if she could go on the trip with her, the segment ends with "Can you be blonde again" (Egan 124), a question that serves no purpose other than to reinforce the idea of aesthetic dissatisfaction, just as Dolly isn't satisfied with the general/genocidal dictator's appearance, Lulu isn't satisfied by her mother's. Appearance and status thus are more important than identity.

Egan ingeniously uses the definition of the novel to subvert her audience's expectations about time. "Great Rock and Roll Pauses" is a slideshow, it's Lincoln's thoughts about all the pauses in famous rock and roll songs. For the reader, however, it's a literal pause from the text itself. The idea behind modern capitalism (or rather, modern hustle culture) is that you never stop and always work and are "always in the grind set." And while that sounds more like a bad motivational video rather than a literary medium worthwhile of analysis, what that translates to is a break, a break from all of Bennie's nostalgia or Dolly's inexplicable ignorance of genocide to try and salvage some semblance of a career, in other words, a break from the metaphorical hustle and one that forces the reader to break the narrative by literally stop reading from left to right. Locating pauses is akin to backmasking and other subversions of normal "reading." even that can be seen as a societal convention (not least because some languages, like certain branches of Semitic Languages (namely Hebrew and Arabic) are read right to left and Mongolian script is read top to bottom), a societal convention that Egan breaks solely to focus on something that on its face value seems completely trivial, but in actuality has a purpose. Even what Lincoln chooses to focus on tells us about how work culture has seeped into and destroyed many people's personal lives. Lincoln's study of the pauses in songs (i.e., the breaks in between work) says more about a rejection of mass consumerism than any of Bennie's endeavors do. When songs pause, we can breathe, we can live. From this viewpoint, everyone that's living is just existing for the purpose of working. There's no meaning to any of the characters work precisely *because* they don't take breaks to understand who they are.

In “’No Future’: Time, Punk Rock and Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad"*, Martin Moling highlights the most obvious example of this novel’s central preoccupation with time:

> Time’s a goon, right?” thus asks Bosko, one of the punk rockers in Egan’s novel. “Isn’t that the expression?” (134). “Time’s a goon, right? You gonna let that goon push you around?” (341) Bennie likewise inquires, trying to urge his old band mate Scotty into performing in front of an audience forty years after the Flaming Dildos’ appearance at the Mab. (Moling 52)

Sure, on the one hand, Bennie was trying to be supportive to his old bandmate, or this could be read as Bennie being so power-hungry, he would literally push his now elderly bandmate into reliving a nostalgia pop they could no longer fathom how to recreate. That ambiguity of motivation is what gives this work its double meaning. It’s not only a rejection of mass consumerism but a rejection of how nostalgia has been weaponized in the world of business. It’s no secret that we as human beings crave nostalgia because it reminds us of a happy time, or at least a happier time than the one in which we now exist. Mass consumerism has exploited this trend, and while this is just a mundane example, it’s part of a larger problem, namely the problem that we just don’t know when to pause, when to break. Music and the music business are all Bennie knows, and he’d rather die reliving his past than live without it for the rest of his future. And all of Egan’s characters suffer from a similar problem. Sasha, for instance, keeps insisting to her therapist that she’s a changed woman yet exhibits the same traits, time and time again.

> All of *A Visit from the Goon Squad*’s principal characters thus are engaged in Melville’s ‘quenchless feud’ in one way or another. Sasha, for instance, desperately wants to please

> Coz, her therapist, by claiming “I’m changing, I'm changing, I'm changing; I’ve changed!” even though no such transformation has taken place. Instead, all she hears lying on his couch is the sound of her time running out, a minute at a time: “another, then another, then one more” (19). (Moling 53)

As Moling also points out, Lou Kline (who had been Bennie’s mentor in the business) lived in denial of the aging process. So, it comes off as no surprise that Bennie himself doesn’t know when to quit–he doesn’t know when to change. Even Dolly, right? She lived in such a denial that her career was over that she abandoned any integrity she might’ve had left to go join the public relations team of a genocidal dictator (again, never specified that it was Gaddafi, but the timing checks out). It’s a trend within Egan’s work. Characters living in denial of both the reality that had passed them by, and the reality they now find themselves in, all because the *perception* of change is more important than change is to these characters. Whether or not any of them are self-fulfilled is irrelevant, so long as they can maintain the superficial appearance of being fulfilled.

THE LITERARY ECONOMY

This is what all three of these works, *We Need New Names, White Teeth, and A Visit from the Goon Squad* have in common: a growing trend in 21st-century postmodern literature is to experiment with forms and stories that otherwise would’ve been seen as completely taboo just a few generations earlier. They thus expand on the second half of the 20th-century canon, which is also experimental, but one thing separates the two. A lot of these stories are fueled by the 21st-century literary economy. Never in the 600 years since the invention of Gutenberg’s printing press (even though print type admittedly goes back to Tang China) has it been easier to write, edit, publish, and market a book. Between the age of the Internet, self (otherwise known as independent) publishing, and subsidized publication, certainly the situation for all three novels discussed in this thesis, the integrity of authorship comes into question. as mentioned earlier, Bulawayo received the Caine Prize to write her novel at Stanford University, Jennifer Egan won the Pulitzer Prize for *A Visit from the Goon Squad* and Zadie Smith was the recipient of numerous awards, including City College's own Langston Hughes Medal. These institutional supports thus raise the question of how much of each work belongs to their original author [self-publishing surely belongs entirely to the author], and how much of their works were geared towards the prize requirements.

While we likely can't know for sure, there are several clues in each work that seem to hint at self-censoring. The most blatant is the likelihood that, without the Caine Prize, *We Need New Names* likely doesn't get published, or at least doesn't gain the circulation traction that it got in the 9 years since its release. This isn't a new phenomenon, either. Frederick Douglass omitted many parts of his personal life (like his improbable journey to the Harrison administration as the precursor to what is now the Ambassador to Haiti, or his marriage to his second wife, who was White) in his *Narrative*. While Bulawayo herself didn't hesitate to write her opinions, one bit, in particular, seems like it was edited, or at least out of place.

> And when we got to America we took our dreams, looked at them tenderly as if they were newly born children, and put them away; we would not be pursuing them. We would never be the things we had wanted to be doctors, lawyers, teachers, engineers. No school for us, even though our visas were school visas. We knew we did not have the money for school to begin with, but we had applied for school visas because that was the only way out. (Bulawayo 166).

It seems ironic here Bulawayo would have Darling know her dreams wouldn’t happen from the moment she arrived in America. This quote would make more sense at the *end* of the book, where Darling’s dreams don’t actually come true and the now teenage protagonist has to come to terms with the lies she was told about migration being a better outcome, rather than at roughly two-thirds of the way through. What’s even more perplexing is the chapter this quote comes from, *How They Lived.* It’s the only chapter in the entire novel that’s written in second person, and it feels like Bulawayo just descends more and more into an undisciplined rant about American stereotypes without any real rhyme, reason, or explanation for its existence. For example

> But then when we got to America and saw all that food, we held our breath and thought, Wait, there must be a God. So happy and grateful, we found his discarded pieces and put them together with Krazy Glue bought at the dollar store for only ninety-nine cents and said, In God We Trust too now, In God We Trust for real, and began praying again. At McDonald’s we devoured Big Macs and wolfed down fries and guzzled supersized Cokes. At Burger King we worshipped Whoppers. At KFC we mauled bucket chicken. We went to Chinese buffets and ate all we could inhale—fried rice, chicken, beef, shrimp, and as for the things whose names we could not read, we simply pointed and said, We want that. (Bulawayo 164).

It seems almost out of character, even for a teenager who ADMITS has never seen food before, for Darling to just go on, seemingly perpetually, about American stereotypes. That’s especially true with what she says, quite literally, at the end of that page:

> How America surprised us at first. If you were not happy with your body you could go to a doctor and say, for instance, Doctor, I was born in the wrong body, just make me right;

> Doctor, I don't like this nose, these breasts, these lips. We looked at people sending their aging parents away to be taken care of by strangers. We looked at parents not being allowed to beat their own children. We looked at strange things like these, things we had never seen in our lives, and said, What kind of land is this, just what kind of land? (Bulawayo 164-165)

There's two arguments that could be made here. The first is that Darling is amazed at just how different America is from Zimbabwe, and while that certainly is true, this just sounds like a right-wing rant about plastic and/or transgender surgery (I'll let the reader be the judge here) that sounds almost too American to be authentic for a Zimbabwean teenager, especially given that Bulawayo here uses the second person pronoun—if Bulawayo's audience was American, then why would any of this be as surprising as it was to Darling? If this paragraph had been written in the first person, it would likely be more believable, but even then it borders along the lines of unauthentic to Darling, or even a person for that matter. Much of this chapter comes off as more of an advertisement that a travel agency put out than it does a teenager's lived experience.

Another interesting example of this phenomenon is at the very beginning of *White Teeth*, no less with the first chapter name, "The Peculiar Second Marriage of Archie Jones," we're not thrust into the beginning of this story, but rather the middle of it, given that we're already told that Archibald has gotten married, divorced, and is getting married again all before we even meet the person behind the name. But even *before that*, we're given a pseudo-chapter, something that reads in between a long dedication and the start of the novel, simply titled *Archie, 1974, 1975*, and only contains the following quotation:

> Every little trifle, for some reason, does seem incalculably important today and when you say of a thing that "nothing hangs on it" it sounds like blasphemy. There's never any

> knowing—how am I to put it? —which of our actions, which of our idlenesses won't have things hanging on it forever. —E. M. Forster, Where Angels Fear to Tread.
>
> (Smith 1)

The author here gives us three notable pieces of information

a) A foreshadowing of Archie's most immutable trait of being a terrible decision maker with a complete lack of detail, or at least lazy enough to not pay attention to details
b) The suggestion that British society seemed to want to make this an immutable trait amongst its population
c) That Archie isn't your average white posh Brit.

And this is all within the first 2 pages.

What's even more interesting is the source material for this quote, E.M. Forster's novel entitled *Where Angels Fear to Tread*. Perhaps this is a coincidence, or perhaps it was by deliberate choice, but there's an inherent symbolism between that source material and the premise of the novel. Angels, at least in Abrahamic traditions, are seen as creatures of inherent goodness or light, and thus would only fear to go to places that aren't inherently good, or would be harmful to them. (Samad's migration to England) and are beings conscious of their environment (something Archie categorically isn't).

Take this bit from later in the novel as an example, when Millat questions what brings the modern Anglo-Saxons to the isle of Britain (remember, Anglo-Saxons were not indigenous Brits).

> What was wrong with all the children, what had gone wrong with these first descendants of the great ocean-crossing experiment? Didn't they have everything they could want? Was there not a substantial garden area, regular meals, clean clothes from Marks 'n'

> Sparks, A-class top-notch education? Hadn't the elders done their best? Hadn't they all come to this island for a reason? To be safe. Weren't they safe?" (Smith 189-190)

It would stand to reason that people migrate for beneficial reasons, or at least believe that the place they're going to is better than the one they're leaving behind. Admittedly, Smith could've been sarcastic here, as to suggest the reasons that the Iqbals migrated was based in illusional fantasy rather than the reality of the situation. Just as Bulawayo questioned the idea that immigration (or migration in general) wasn't always a one-way positive trip (i.e., the idea of "the grass is greener on the other side" isn't always true), Smith also challenges it, even if both think migration is an inherently good thing.

All three of these works challenge mass consumerism in some way. *We Need New Names* questions how greed brings the worst out of society (the destruction of paradise, the sexual assault, Darling's inability to fit in in America, etc.), *White Teeth* posits that mass consumerism interferes with the advancement of a multicultural society and *A Visit from the Goon Squad* claims that modern hustle culture interferes with work-life balance. One question here, with all these 21st-century works, is who is the audience? Ironically, it might not be the multiculturalists that one might think. Sure, all three women praise multiculturalism, but then their work would only serve as a confirmation bias for their readers if that was the intended audience. Less cynically, we can believe they were aiming at a different audience (i.e., people who don't necessarily agree with each work's premise). While Bulawayo and Egan's audiences are hard to pinpoint, Smith's isn't. In fact, Smith's audience might be the most ingenious of the three. Smith's main character is your typical White Brit, except when he isn't. Archie might be so blue-collar working class his neck might be literally blue but that doesn't change the fact that the driving motivator of the story isn't Archie trying to get rich and failing, nor trying to act rich and coming off as inauthentic, but rather he is motivated by his friendship with Samal and the rest of the Iqbal family. That is, to Smith, what gives "Britain" its meaning, the concept of multiculturalism that can blur the lines of the rather messy situation that is modern race relations. Archie would therefore be exactly the type of person Smith is writing to, namely, an audience of people that, in Smith's viewpoint, are greater than the mediocrities that society told them they could achieve and might rise above mediocrity simply by embracing the same multiculturalism that Smith herself has.

Pinpointing Egan's audience is a little bit harder, however. Egan's book is, as mentioned before, neither a novel, nor a compilation, but rather a work that straddles the line between those two things–her audience obviously isn't the music industry bigwigs who have put profit over people, since she spends much of the book criticizing the mass consumerism and minimalism that has yanked the art from the industry. She wouldn't be trying to convince them that their positions are null and void, even if that's in practice what ends up happening. Her book is about the trials and tribulations of business when everyone is so intertwined with a life and career that they neither want nor understand why they're in it. Sure, it could be seen as a cautionary tale against making meaning of meaningless work, and thus her audience could be working-class to college-educated professionals. It would certainly explain why time is a major leitmotif in Egan's work. Sometimes, we all just need a pause, and sometimes those pauses are what give life its meaning.

It is Bulawayo's work that is the most complicated however, and the most difficult to pinpoint an audience for, and to identify a reason to explain why she wrote *We Need New Names*. *We Need New Names* is a book about many things but most importantly it is a book about changing circumstances. While the simple "it's meant for everyone" lesson is perhaps the most direct conclusion we could make, it's also likely incorrect. Bulawayo fundamentally DIDN'T intend this book for everyone, but rather, the crowd who is the least willing to listen to its message—those being the people who believe there are guarantees about our world. Darling, as aforementioned, came from a much different Zimbabwe than Bulawayo herself, and that's telling. Colonialism ravaged Darling's Zimbabwe and many sub-Saharan African nations. What was left to follow was a disaster, namely, nation-states that were fundamentally set up as colonies, not nation States. Bulawayo's upbringing was far less traumatic than was her avatar's, Darling. The key question remains, namely, how much of *We Need New Names* was edited when Bulawayo received the Caine Prize and the Man Booker Prize of Literature, and she finished the book at Stanford University? Again, we'll never have a definitive answer to just how much was influenced out, but Stanford, a world-renowned university, selling a post-colonial narrative about how European powers left a devastated African continent to rot and how moving to the U.S. isn't the answer sounds just as plausible as this being entirely within Bulawayo's voice. (i.e., that she didn't censor herself in some respects solely to get the book published in the first place.

That said, let's not denounce the work that all three women have done to transform literature in the last quarter of a century. The 21st Century has seen plenty of works that have challenged the hegemony of the literary canons a literary heritage. Smith, Bulawayo and Egan all bring something to that discussion. We can all learn something from these women, from the authors of post-postmodern literary fiction. The 21st century has seen its own trials and tribulations, from the 9/11 terrorist attacks to the rise of terrorism around the world, from the H1N1 and Ebola epidemics to the COVID-19 pandemic, from the U.S. electing its first Black President to electing its first Orange one. Literature is a field that adapts to the changing tides of history, and a study in which we learn as much from the world as we learn through it.

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