‘Our Hands are Dirty:’ Using Waste to Respond to Environmental Apocalypse in Jennifer Egan’s *A Visit From the Goon Squad*

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Jennifer Egan’s 2010 novel *A Visit From the Goon Squad* examines the ageing of loosely connected characters across thirteen chapters, and in doing so, the novel offers an extended meditation on the varieties of waste that we encounter in our daily lives. While Egan recognizes the multivalent ways that her characters – and readers – understand waste, the novel ultimately presents waste as a material and metaphorical means of bringing together disparate people, objects, and environments, many of which have been discarded and forgotten.

Egan’s meditation on waste offers a critique of a ‘hygienic imagination’ which transforms homogeneity, utility, and ethnocentric understandings of personal cleanliness into ethical goods (see Sheila Cavanagh’s *Queering Bathrooms: Gender, Sexuality, and the Hygienic Imagination* (2010)). In such a definition of hygiene, the fear of interacting with waste leads to the neglect of people and places identified as waste. In such an ‘hygienic imagination,’ waste threatens livelihood: ‘Excrement and its equivalents (decay, infection, disease, corpse, etc.) stand for the danger to identity that comes from without: the ego threatened by the non-ego, society threatened by its outside, life by death’ (Kristeva 1982: 71). Set within a variety of wastelands, from 9/11 to a future environmental dystopia, *Goon Squad* invites readers to think about waste, to look at waste, and to get their hands dirty, instead of ignoring and excluding waste as matter that threatens our existence. Much of Egan’s novel is implicitly oriented toward the September 11th attacks on the World Trade Center, which represent a destruction of any false belief in security, safety, and wholeness. The novel frames the aftermath of 9/11, with its production of waste through physical debris and human deaths, as a wasteland which readers and the novel’s characters are forced to engage with. The novel asks us to reflect on how we make meaning out of this space of waste and fragmentation.

One solution for dealing with a sense of fragmentation, Egan’s novel suggests, is punk rock and its aesthetics of muddiness and dirtiness. Punk, as a music associated with waste, becomes a powerful art form and practice that shows one way of directly engaging with waste. Likewise, Egan uses punk rock’s muddiness to show how art or practices centred on waste can

actually be more productive and more environmentally responsible, than art or practices purportedly centred on cleanliness and wholeness. The novel juxtaposes a local punk scene against a corporate record label that has ties to multinational oil extractors and thus contributes to the production of an environmental wasteland. Indeed, by the end of *Good Squad*, it is punk rock and other practices that willingly engage with waste that hold the potential to deal with environmental wastelands produced by climate change. Egan's novel moves through various iterations of waste – from the September 11th debris to punk rock – to remind readers of the need to see waste, think about waste, and physically engage with waste. To deal with our ever-increasing environmental wasteland, the novel suggests that we first need to be willing to get our hands dirty.

Making Sense of 9/11: Waste and Memory

The September 11th attacks on the World Trade Center produced waste, measured not only by the physical debris of the towers, but also by thousands of human causalities. Egan's novel frequently returns – implicitly and explicitly – to the rubble and the waste produced by these events. For Egan, the site where the World Trade Center once stood serves as a wasteland, a reminder of the threat of destruction, but also as a call to work with the rubble. Before turning to passages from *Goon Squad*, this essay first reviews several critics who have already theorized the 9/11 attack as a waste-event. Such a survey will better help us understand Egan's investment in building art out of fragmented forms and detritus.

In her reading of the 'rubble archive' of 9/11, Patricia Yaeger introduces the problem of 'the inability to distinguish, to tell body from body or flesh from rubble' in the aftermath of 9/11 (2003: 187). Yaeger continues: 'How do we think about the "gray glue-substance" and "the ashes of the dead" simultaneously? ... To think of the bodies of the dead mingling with this debris, to think of the results of the 9/11 explosions as detritus, gives one pause' (187). Likewise, Kay Turner captures how 9/11 fragmented and mixed together objects previously considered whole, distinct, and permanent:

> Sudden annihilation had transformed the seemingly permanent into the definitively ephemeral: buildings became dust; work became millions of tiny scraps of paper floating in the air; and people, a total of 2603 of them, became bits and pieces of body parts, traces of DNA, or disappeared altogether, incinerated. (2009: 162)

The merging of 'traces of DNA' with the 'dust' of the buildings becomes even more prominent in the treatment of the victims' bodies. Cinzia Scarpino recognizes the indecorous treatment of the dead when body parts, clothing, and office debris were indiscriminately shipped to the Fresh Kills Landfill, a 'great container and disposer of thrown-away garbage and used commodities once belonging to otherwise anonymous New Yorkers' (2011: 251). While Scarpino recognizes the difficulty of separating the dust of human bodies from the dust of office supplies, the equivalency of human bodies and office debris as waste evokes a long history of treating specific humans as waste to be discarded.

The 'waste' of 9/11 did not just end with the attacks. Scarpino documents the dehumanizing treatment of human bodies shipped to Fresh Kills, but she also recognizes that more positive efforts to memorialize 9/11 often centre around waste, debris, and seemingly meaningless objects: 'If 9/11 is the story of things – and people – falling down, then its representation is largely based on their recovery, the picking up and stitching of the pieces and threads of interrupted lives onto narratives at the same time individual and collective' (238). Scarpino traces the many ways that random places ('sidewalks, lampposts, fences, telephone booths, barricades, garbage dumpsters, walls, and firehouses and police stations') and random objects ('flowers, flags, candles, ribbons, scraps of paper, chalk paints, and teddy bears') became shrines and ritual objects for mourning those dead from the attacks (238).

Situated within this background of 9/11 as a waste-event, Egan's *Goon Squad* becomes a novel about the attempts to create from the pieces of waste produced – or, at the very least made more prominent – by the events of September 11th. Egan's novel represents an attempt to pick up the pieces in the face of such a massive loss of human life. Early in the novel, Sasha's 'eyes [moved] to the empty spaces where the Twin Towers had been,' and she reflects, 'It's incredible…how there's just nothing there… There should be *something*, you know? … Like an echo. Or an outline' (36). Sasha's observation that there is nothing there but that there should be something exemplifies the novel's overall project of putting together pieces of waste to recreate something new. Like the fragmented forms of ephemera produced in the aftermath of 9/11, Egan's novel is composed of fragments, or, in David Cowart's words, the novel is a 'postmodern pastiche' (2015: 243). The novel is a collection of short stories that Egan published elsewhere, including *Granta*, *Harper's*, the *New Yorker*, *Tin House*, and an edited collection called *This is Not Chick Lit* (see *Goon Squad*'s copyright page). As a novel composed of short stories, the form

of *Goon Squad* reflects Egan's project of piecing together fragmented parts. *Goon Squad* follows a range of characters – Sasha, Bennie, Jocelyn, Jules, Scotty, Dolly, Drew, Ted, Alison and Alex – rather than just following the trajectory of a single character. In a related way, the novel shifts between first- and third-person narrators, and the novel shifts backwards and forward through time. The form of the novel is also fragmented through Egan's inclusion of journalistic metafiction in chapter nine, 'Forty-Minute Lunch: Kitty Jackson Opens Up About Love, Fame, and Nixon!', a PowerPoint in chapter twelve, 'Great Rock and Roll Pauses,' and futuristic text massaging ('nxt 2 myn. No mOr Ar/lyt' (327)) in chapter thirteen. Lastly, Egan frames the novel as a vinyl record with sides A and B, designating the novel's two major sections. Cowart suggests that Egan's novel is a parody of *The Waste Land* with its 'fragmented narrative, with its complicated character relationships and tangled chronology' (245-46). The fragmented form of *Goon Squad* thus reinforces Egan's characters' sense of disjointedness in the aftermath of 9/11 and their attempts to recreate something out of waste.

Singing in Punk Rock's Muddiness

The novel's emphasis on fragmented and incomplete forms likewise parallels the music producer character Bennie Salazar's engagement with the music of his youth, proto-punk and punk bands like the Sleepers, the Dead Kennedys, the Who, the Stooges, Flipper, the Mutants, Eye Protection, Patti Smith, Black Flag, and the Circle Jerks (22, 36). Bennie frames punk rock as an art form and practice associated with waste – represented primarily as "mud" – in opposition to supposedly cleaner styles of music based on a false sense of wholeness. Punk rock, for Bennie and other characters, serves as a way to engage with waste in a meaningful way. Instead of pretending that waste does not exist, punk rock offers an "in your face" embrace of waste. Bennie's nostalgic yearning for punk rock prepares readers for another character, Scotty, a former punk rocker whose do-it-yourself punk lifestyle represents an even more extreme engagement with waste (Schuster 2015: 148). Much of Bennie's preference for waste stems from his sense of nostalgia for his youth; for Scotty, his engagement with waste stems from a practical necessity of surviving.

For Bennie, punk rock's muddiness is better than modern digitized music that is 'too clear, too clean' (24). Of particular significance in Bennie's description of modern music versus the music of his youth is the way that he frames his discussion in hygienic discourse. Unlike the

'muddiness, the sense of actual musicians playing actual instruments in an actual room,' modern musical pieces are essentially 'bloodless constructions' (24). Martin Moling argues: 'Digitization, Egan seems to propose, merely produces formulaic simulacra of rock music's erstwhile exciting nuance' (2016: 61). In Bennie's view, however, digitization turns the "muddy" life-filled music into lifeless sound, comparable even to a genocide: 'The problem was digitization, which sucked the life out of everything that got smeared through its microscopic mesh. Film, photography, music: dead. As aesthetic holocaust! Bennie knew better than to say this stuff aloud' (23). To Bennie, the process of digitization makes music sound too artificial because it lacks the staticky "muddy" sound that prior forms of music had. Bennie figuratively imagines pushing the music through a 'microscopic mesh' (23), presumably of a filtering system, to remove any aural impurities. Jennifer J. Smith explains, 'Bennie's frustration that technology is making everything too glossy, too sanitized extends from an ongoing anxiety about a loss of authenticity. Recording processes get more precise, and the studio's idiosyncrasies get lost. Life is messy; music should be too' (2018: 141). The "artificial" desire for "clean" sounding music misrepresents the material muddiness of "actual" reality.

Bennie's condemnation of new music also grows out of his critique of the ethical costs of the record company. Bennie admits that he produces music to 'make songs that people would love and buy and download as ring tones (and steal, of course) – above all, to satisfy the multinational crude-oil extractors he'd sold his label to five years ago' (23). Here, Egan reveals the underside of so-called cleansing projects. While the music seems clean, it is funded by multinational crude-oil extractors, companies that literally and figuratively participate in a 'dirty' business that continues the exploitative practices of colonialism by taking economic control over parts of the Global South. The clean sounding music covers up its funding from the immoral 'dirty' practices of oil extraction. Punk rock is muddy and life-giving: mud provides the space for plants to grow, as well as providing the basis for clay and other materials needed for sustaining animal life. In sharp contrast, the dirtiness of the multinational oil extraction companies is life-taking: displacing communities, contaminating the environment, and fuelling political conflicts that disproportionately affect marginalized communities.

By connecting modern music to notoriously unethical oil companies, Bennie subtlety sets up a contrast between the unethical impulse of modern music versus the ethical impulse of the muddy music of his youth, which Bennie identifies elsewhere as punk rock. To better understand

the ethical impulse of Egan's novel, we need to further unpack punk rock's dirty aesthetics. Punk rock, with its affinity for filth, offers a meaningful way to engage with and understand waste and discarded material. Bennie's characterization of punk as muddy actually corresponds with a long history of associating punk with waste. Within an environmental context, as later sections will show, punk rock's affinity for filth implements an aesthetic of shock intended to prompt ethical environmental action.

Other critics have noted the role that punk rock plays in Egan's novel. For example, Moling considers how punk rock and punk apocalypse help Egan approach time as a flexible construct: 'Via the punk apocalypse, Egan has discovered a strategy to creatively disrupt time's sway over narrative chronology' (66). Similarly, John Masterson reads Egan's novel alongside other 9/11 novels to consider how these works 'interrogate the hegemony of the visual by inviting readers to…listen in to new and potentially more provocative conversations' (2016: 79). That is, these works ask readers to question the hegemony of the alphabetic text and pay more attention to how musical discourses engage eschatology. Gerard Moorey also pairs Egan's novel with Jonathan Franzen's to argue that both texts reflect the death of rock and the countercultural ideologies that accompanied rock, while Egan and Franzen still highlight the possibility of a 'tentative rebirth, although on more modest and sober terms' (2014: 5).

Absent from Moling, Matterson and Moorey is any sustained discussion of punk rock's attraction toward dirt and the role that waste plays in Egan's novel. Much of the punk rock scene revels in metaphors and images of dirt, waste, and uncleanliness. Punk rock, according to punk innovator Richard Hell, was about authentic experience: 'What I wanted was for music to be about real life again, which the pop music at the time was not, and to me real life seemed dirty and crazy and intense as well as funny' (2008; see also Strong (2018)). For Hell, 'real life' was dirty, as opposed to clean pop music that inaccurately depicted life. Part of this association of 'real life' with dirt relies on the long tradition of casting the lower classes as dirty. Punk rock saw itself as aligning with the common people: 'The "working classness," the scruffiness and earthiness of punk ran directly counter to the arrogance, elegance and verbosity of the glam rock superstars….rendering working classness metaphorically in chains and hollow cheeks, "dirty" clothing (stained jackets, tarty see-through blouses) and rough and ready diction' (Hebdige 63). Bennie's nostalgic yearning for punk rock's muddiness corresponds to Hell's reading of dirt as authentic because muddiness signals a closeness to the earth. Mud, like dirt and water, is

"natural," rather than the manufactured cleanliness of modern music. Hell suggests that the dirtiness of punk rock is not just a reflection of its authenticity but a part of its subversive character: punk 'means anti-authority, independent, tricky, unsentimental, dirty, quick, subversive, guiltless. It means not accepting the ordinary terms of behavior' (2008). Like Bennie, who yearns for the muddiness of punk rock, Hell sees punk rock's dirtiness as a means of rejecting the status quo, especially the perceived romanticism and idealism that purportedly defined much of the rock of the 1960s. Punk grew out of the failure of hippie optimism: 'The tremendous idealism and promise of harmony of the 1960s had been steadily eroded by assassinations, burning cities, white flight, busing violence, a disgraced president, and a lost war' (Rombes 2005: 20). Punk rockers offered what was, in their view, a more authentic, realistic attitude toward life with all its grittiness.

Hell is not alone in seeing dirtiness as the aesthetic basis of punk rock. Dave Laing recounts how many critics of punk rock labelled the bands as dirty and mentally unstable, labels that these bands were quick to adopt in their embrace images of death, decay, and waste:

> More pro-punk authors, in fact, accepted and reinforced its image as sick and dirty, following the classic shock-tactic of affirming values which were denied by the doxa. The punk specialists of the music press delighted in such tactics. Burchill and Parsons of the New Musical Express hailed Johnny Rotten for 'dancing like a rotten corpse,' while in Sounds Garry Bushell turned the 'dirty' insult round by denouncing the (non-punk) organization Music for Socialism as 'well-scrubbed politicians of rock'. (2015: 143)

Echoing Hell's praise of the subversive dirtiness of punk rock, Laing reads the purpose of punk rock's dirtiness as intentionally provocative in its resistance against the status quo.

While punk rock's orientation toward dirt and waste appears merely playful, several scholars have pointed to the ways in which punk's dirtiness serves productive ethical and political purposes. Joshua Schuster, for example, is one such critic who argues that significant portions of the punk scene advocated for localized, leftist political activism. He argues that

> a significant portion of punk that carried a leftist message that mixed anticorporate and anticapitalist rants, a low-impact DIY [Do-It-Yourself] practice of everyday life, and an activist concern for burgeoning ecological matters such as nuclear proliferation, chemical warfare, urban industrial pollution, animal rights, and

> vegetarianism. Instead of using common environmentalist tropes and imagery of the day such as harmony, balance, and a vision of steady-state ecotopia, punks relished in negativity, crassness, confrontation, anger, sarcasm, goofiness, stylistic excess, and garish imagery. (2015: 148)

Muddiness and dirt reject the corporate and capitalistic status quo that favour productivity, uniformity, and cleanliness. Punk serves as a basis for Bennie and Scotty to reject artificial ideas of corporate uniformity, cleanliness, and wholeness and instead to seek to build something that takes waste seriously.

Scotty as the Emblematic Punk Waste Figure

While Bennie nostalgically longs for the muddy sounds of early punk, his friend Scotty fully embodies the dirty orientation of punk rock. Where Bennie is someone who likes the idea of waste, Scotty is someone who actually gets his hands dirty and lives in waste. When he was younger, Scotty was a talented, 'magnetic' guitarist who was able to build his own guitars and who caused everyone to gather around him whenever he played (41). He had 'bare muscles' that 'shine with sweat and beer' (52). Scotty's professional success does not continue, however: he becomes a socially marginalised figure who works as a janitor and avoids all digital technologies.

Scotty's transition from an attractive, muscular star to a marginal figure who works in sanitation and lives outside of the technological world bespeaks his own identity as waste: someone forgotten, discarded, or deemed no longer socially useful. Toward the end of the novel, Egan repeatedly characterizes Scotty as a 'quavering husk' (344), a term that underscores his lack of usefulness. When a minor character, Alex, first sees Scotty, he thinks that Bennie has replaced Scotty with a 'decrepit roadie' (332), a road crew member worn out or wasted away from old age. On realizing that this decrepit roadie was Scotty, Alex reflects, 'Scotty Hauseman did not exist. He was a word casing in human form: a shell whose essence has vanished' (332). According to Alex, Scotty is a husk to be discarded as a worthless exterior. Likewise, Scotty has 'gutted cheeks,' 'blasted eyes,' a 'derelict impression,' and 'wreck of a face' (332). The description of Scotty's 'blasted eyes' continues Alex's framing of Scotty as a corn husk because 'blasted' means 'cursed' or 'balefully or perniciously blown or breathed upon,' or 'blighted,' often in reference to crops (OED, 'blasted,' def. 1). Alex also introduces a nautical one: Scotty is

like a derelict or forsaken ship, potentially because that ship has been 'wreck[ed]' (332). Indeed, as critic Noah Mass has already pointed out, Scotty is a 'broken wreck of a man' (2016: 107). The emphasis, through the agricultural and nautical metaphors, is that Scotty is seemingly worthless, a body who has been forgotten, discarded, or left behind.

Scotty's occupation in waste management reflects his own status as waste. Just as Scotty cleans up objects that have been discarded, forgotten, or left behind, he himself is a forgotten figure, until the final chapter in which he becomes a redeemed and redemptive rock celebrity. He explains, 'Things had gotten – what's the word? Dry. Things had gotten sort of dry for me. I was working for the city as a janitor in a neighborhood elementary school and, in summers, collecting litter in the park alongside the East River near the Williamsburg Bridge' (93). Readers see Scotty's role as a collector of discarded things, too, when Egan reveals that Scotty's couch had been 'pulled from a garbage dump' (96). Here, Scotty demonstrates the punk ethic that Schuster describes: rather than accept the couch as no longer valuable because someone else has discarded it, Scotty envisions a new purpose for the couch. Scotty's willingness to reuse the discarded couch represents the punk challenge to a corporate, consumerist culture that neatly distinguishes between clean and unclean, as well as valuable and worthless.

In addition to his labour's orientation around waste, Scotty's diet involves food potentially harmed by toxic waste. Scotty catches and eats polluted fish from the East River, but he does not mind that 'pollution was present' because that 'was the beauty of it…that you knew all about the pollution, unlike the many poisons you consumed each day in ignorance' (94). Scotty's admission that he prefers to eat polluted fish because of his awareness of pollutants exhibits his strange embrace of pollution. On one hand, his life seems to be oriented around waste: from his own identity as someone left behind, to his custodial role, to his consumption of waste-filled fish, to his gifting of the polluted fish to Bennie in a later scene. On the other hand, Scotty's waste-oriented life does not just speak to his own identity as waste but also to a recognition of cleanliness as an influential social value. Scotty seems obsessively to dry clean his pants and jacket: 'The week before, I'd taken it to the cleaners still in its dry-cleaning bag, which caused a breakdown in the gal behind the counter…. Suffice to say that the jacket I put on that morning to visit Bennie Salazar was one clean jacket' (94). Scotty's desire to dry-clean his suit reflects a seemingly absurd obsession with cleanliness, perhaps an obsession that grows out of Scotty's desire to belong to the same social class as Bennie, because, as Susan Signe Morrison

suggests, 'Civilized behavior is especially cultivated by those who are not yet or quite in the highest class, who strive to imitate their betters, who in reality, are not better at all' (2015: 86). Even in this chapter, before Scotty's redemption at the end of the novel, Scotty imagines the possibility of becoming something new. By dry-cleaning his jacket, Scotty ensures that he is always ready for a new moment. The suit's status as dry-cleaned 'new again' hints at the potential for Scotty to become new again (108).

Scotty's strange embrace of the pollution is shocking, but the shock value is exactly Egan's point. Recalling Young's assertion that punk rock adopted dirtiness for the sake of shock, I suggest that Scotty, as Egan's emblematic punk rock hero, similarly adopts behaviours intended to shock other characters and readers. Scotty's punk embrace of toxic waste, in his fish, his dry-cleaned clothing, and even his occupation, intentionally shocks readers into noticing the blithely accepted toxic world in which they live. As I will demonstrate in the next section, Egan raises the stakes of environmental questions by jumping forward in time to an environmental dystopia in 2021. Shocking readers will not do enough to completely reverse the environmental harm caused by climate change, but as I will show, punk rock offers other strategies for imagining and enacting models of living that are more eco-friendly than current economic and social practices.

Punk Rock and DIY as Environmental Practices

By the end of the novel, Egan shifts to 2021 and a world that is increasingly becoming an environmental wasteland. Along with particular waste-spaces, like Ground Zero or the polluted waterways in which Scotty fishes, the end of *Goon Squad* depicts a futuristic world in which climate change has nearly destroyed the environmental topography. Egan's novel no longer asks us to respond to individual, localized spaces of waste but to a world of waste. In a 2011 interview with Anne Mulkern, Egan explains how she read about climate change's potential to shift the earth's axis and how that possibility influenced her representation of the future story-world at the end of *Goon Squad*:

> I found that absolutely horrifying. It touched me on such a deep level to think that what we've done to the planet could have much more impact than just the state of affairs on the planet's surface, which is worrisome enough. But the fact that it could actually change the planet's position in the solar system even slightly, that was just

> shocking to me. That really stayed with me, and I guess it returned when I was imagining forward. (2011)

In the novel, the narrator explicitly identifies the climatic changes as global warming, 'The warming-related "adjustments" to Earth's orbit had shortened the winter days, so that now, in January, sunset was taking place at 4:23' (2010: 322). Lawns, too, are nearly extinct because of climate change. In her PowerPoint chapter, Sasha's daughter reveals, 'When I was little, there were lawns…. Now, you need a lot of credits for a lawn or else a turbine, which is expensive' (242). The slide titled 'Desert Landscape' suggests that climate change has resulted in extreme desertification. Elsewhere in the novel, we learn that weather in January is 'eighty-nine degrees and dry' and that trees now 'bloomed in January' (327). The water levels, too, appear to have risen, as Egan reveals the construction of a 'water wall' or 'WATERWALK!' built around the Hudson (323). When asked about this scene, Egan reflects on the harm that rising sea levels will cause coastal cities: 'If the sea level really does rise drastically, life in New York is going to change. I mean, we're at sea level'. Zara Dinnen reads the 'water wall' as a 'wall to manage the hours sunlight. The Anthropocene period is in its dying days, and so sunlight must be rationed"' (2018: 151). Egan's explanation, however, suggests that Dinnen's explanation is a misreading. Still, Dinnen is correct in asserting that Egan's novel depicts the planet 'in its dying days.'

The PowerPoint chapter indicates that the United States has finally turned to solar energy in Arizona as one of the primary energy sources. Alison recounts that she and her father walked 'a long time…for miles' to get to solar panels that seem like they are in a different 'city or another planet' (291). The panels have positive benefits: as Alison notes, 'they're actually mending the earth,' and they 'live where all the lawns and golf courses used to be' (291). While we do not fully know the story world of Egan's United States in 2021, the replacement of golf courses with solar panels suggests the possibility that the United States no longer maintains predominantly, white, segregated spaces and instead has shifted its economic resources toward climate change, an environmental crisis that harms predominantly low-income and marginalized communities. Yet, even as the United States has erected these solar panel fields in an attempt to help ease the environmental crisis, the construction of the panels has also resulted in environmental damage. Described as 'angled oily black things' that 'look evil,' the panels created 'shade' that 'made a lot of desert creatures homeless' (291). Allison also tells readers that 'There were protests when they [the solar panels] were built' (291). Allison does not make it

clear if the protests were over the solar panel's aesthetic ugliness, that the panels replace the 'lawns and golf courses,' or that the panels disrupt the desert habitats of species, but protests over the disruption of the desert ecosystems seem likely, given Allison's concern about the 'homeless' creatures.

Set within a world impacted by global warming, the final chapter of Egan's novel asks readers to consider how to live in a world that is a literal wasteland. How do people still find meaning and form communities within an environmental wasteland? Egan's turn toward punk for making sense of the environmental apocalypse is a sensible strategy, given punk rock's birth in the apocalyptic fears of the Cold War: 'Apocalypse was in the air and the rhetoric of punk was drenched in apocalypse: in the stock imagery of crisis and sudden change' (Hebdige 2012: 27). Punk rock grew out of and in response to the decades in which a nuclear apocalypse was a legitimate concern. Apocalypse is in the air now too – and in Egan's imagined 2021 – given the increasingly visible effects of climate change. Punk rock, with its apocalyptic origins, can help us make sense of our contemporary environmental apocalypse.

To be clear, the punk movement's adoption of apocalyptic imagery and rhetoric should not be read simplistically as a nihilistic embrace of the end-times. John Parham suggests that one of the political strategies of punk is an 'aesthetic of shock' intended to draw attention to the very problems – whether political, social, or environmental – that they seem to embrace (2011: 77). Punk rock's shock factor should prompt listeners to imagine an alternate means of living. Parham argues that for all its 'apparent fatalism' punk rock 'actually offers … a resource of hope' (78). Punk sees itself as definitely angry, even parodic, in contrast to an earlier generation of rock interested in just "Let[ing] It Be." As stated earlier, punk represented a response to earlier, optimistic social movements: 'The tremendous idealism and promise of harmony of the 1960s had been steadily eroded by assassinations, burning cities, white flight, busing violence, a disgraced president, and a lost war' (Rombes 2005: 20). Stacy Thompson similarly argues that punk rock contains an 'underlying refusal to give up on imagining something other than the world as it is' (2012: 4).

Thus, we can read Scotty's openness about toxic behaviour as not just demonstrating eccentric characteristics but participating in an aesthetics of shock. Readers and the characters around Scotty become shocked at his embrace of fishing in a polluted river, even as, according to Scotty, they consume poisons in ignorance. Today, in an environmentally conscious age, to not

recognize that we engage with poisons or toxins in our daily life would be an act of defiant ignorance. From pesticides, to automobile exhausts, to modern pharmaceuticals, our modern lives are ones of daily encounter with toxins, and our refusal to find alternative modes of living, ones that are less environmentally toxic, demonstrates our lack of willingness to face the toxic world. Scotty's bizarre embrace of pollution places toxicity at the foreground, urging readers to see beyond their akratic ignorance of climate change and our toxic lifestyles.

In addition to using an aesthetics of shock, Scotty also demonstrates environmentally friendly DIY practices. As mentioned earlier, Scotty rescuing his couch from a garbage dump reflects a punk DIY practice of reuse. Other characters similarly embrace this DIY principle of punk ecology, even if only briefly. Sasha, for example, embraces 'trash' in her artwork. In her PowerPoint presentation, Alison reveals that Sasha 'makes sculptures in the desert out of trash and our old toys…. Eventually her sculptures fall apart, which is "part of the process"' (242). Readers later learn that Sasha's 'sculptures [are also] made of train tracks and doll heads,' and that these sculptures are 'fading into the dust' (286). Sasha, here, participates in both punk's toxic or dirty discourse and its DIY practices by finding new value in the waste produced by capitalism.

Sasha's sculptures, composed of dolls and train tracks, speak to a project of reuse that runs counter to consumerism. Sasha gives dolls, toys that are emblematic of materialism and consumerism, new life by reworking them into her artwork. Likewise, railroad tracks function as refuse of capitalism. Railroads are the very means of transporting resources to be used in creating goods and then transporting goods to be sold. Egan's selection of doll heads and train tracks, then, highlights the disparity between the crucial role that these objects once played in systems of consumerism and capitalism and their status now as discarded junk. Sasha engages the landscape, now turned waste, and creates art out of the discarded rubbish of consumer cultures. Objects only become 'trash' when they no longer seem to carry value or when they no longer fulfil the purpose for which they were created. Like Scotty's use of the discarded couch, Sasha's willingness to see this 'trash' as more than 'trash,' as having meaning beyond its production value, exemplifies Egan's punk rock aesthetics and prompts readers to reflect on their own use (and potential re-use) of commodities that are no longer brand-new.

Conclusion

Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad* invites readers to think more actively about the place of waste in their own lives, their habits that contribute to waste, and practices that offer meaningful, ethical ways for engaging with waste – particularly environmental wastelands. Egan's novel moves us through various iterations of waste in a recognition of the variety of waste – material and mythical – that we encounter in our lives. Rather than ignoring waste as something threatening, external, and *not-us*, Egan's novel emphasizes the critical importance of facing waste directly.

Goon Squad concludes with a celebration of how art can rebuild wastelands. The novel culminates in a mythic Woodstock-like event in which the once-forgotten, dirty figure of Scotty plays music that brings together a variety of different people. The concert takes place at 'The Footprint,' founded at the former site of the 9/11 attacks. The site of complete waste and destruction becomes a site of art that unifies people. Scotty unites 'all these people, the parents and the kidless, the single and the coupled, gay and straight, clean and pierced…. *Every single one* [sic]' (330). Scotty, a man who had been forgotten and thrown away, someone who looks like a washed-up roadie, who lives and works among toxic waste, becomes a unifying symbol for Egan's Americans in 2021. Perhaps, Egan's novel suggests, the United States can cultivate a culture that values all people, even those who seem like waste, and which does not demand the sanitization of things considered dirty.

Scotty's comeback concert provides the close of the novel with a glimmer of hope, even if the moment is far-fetched, overdramatic, and idealized. Throughout Egan's novel, characters reflect on the passing of time and the eventual moment when the Goon Squad wins. A hum resounds throughout the novel: the 'sound of time passing' (340). Characters age and die, art and architecture decays: 'Universal, defining symbols made meaningless by nothing more than time' (215). Despite our constant decay and eventual deaths, the novel suggests we can still carry a sense of hope and optimism for the future, trusting that younger generations will be able to live ethically in the midst of a widespread wasteland. The novel hints that art holds the key to an ethical environmental engagement that can help us make sense of our cultural, political, and environmental wastelands. Prior to Scotty's concert, Alex looks out, sees 'older children carrying younger ones' and imagines the children as a 'kind of army…the incarnation of faith in those who weren't aware of having any left' (330). *Goon Squad* does not offer neat or tidy solutions to dealing with wastelands, but it ends with a faith in younger generations. The solutions the novel

offers are limited: Can punk rock really help us to flourish in the midst of social, political, and ecological destruction? Perhaps not. Engaging with waste is messy, dirty work; it is not supposed to be clean-cut. Looking directly at waste, being willing to engage with waste, and getting our hands dirty are the first steps to make sense of our wasteland.

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