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Modalities of Women's Time in Novels by Nella Larsen, Joan Didion and Jennifer Egan

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Abstract

This thesis explores modalities of time in Nella Larsen's *Passing* (1929), Joan Didion's *Play It As It Lays* (1970) and Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2011). It examines how temporality is thematised in story and narrative form. The central claim is that the female characters operate within patriarchal temporal regimes that place demands on how women order their time in the present and limit what kind of future they can attain – or imagine. The thesis surveys what women must sacrifice and/or repress to operate within the dominant temporal order. The thesis focuses on the temporal paths available to the female characters, and their opportunities for self-determination. It highlights the persistent view of marriage and motherhood as the temporal destinies of women. Central to the analysis presented is Julia Kristeva's conception of a cyclical women's time and Elizabeth Freeman's notion of chrononormativity. The thesis employs Gérard Genette's structural theory of narrative to analyse the crafting of time in the three novels.

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Introduction

‘I’m changing I’m changing I’m changing: I’ve changed! Redemption, transformation – God how she wanted these things. Every day, every minute. Didn’t everyone?’ (19) thinks Sasha, the main character of the first chapter of Jennifer Egan’s innovative and exhilarating novel *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, published in 2011.

When the reader first meets Sasha, she is a 35-year old, single, recently jobless woman, living in New York in the first decade of the twenty-first century. Her future is open. She is free to change and make a new life for herself. No one will question her ability or right to enter and exit relationships, find new employment, amass property or move to a different city, and to do so on her own. The possibilities Sasha has to transform and reimagine herself vastly exceed those that were available to generations of American women before her. But the temporal pathways open to Sasha are not unrestricted. She, too, must forge her future self within the limits imposed on women by the culture and times in which she lives.

My central claim in this thesis is that Sasha and the generations of women preceding her operate within temporal regimes that place demands on how women order their time in the present and limit what kind of future they can attain – or imagine. Of course, the temporal regimes also influence how men can and do structure their days and plan their lives. However, it is my contention that the burden of society’s temporal demands falls disproportionately on women. Throughout the twentieth century, women have paid a high price to adhere to reigning temporal norms. Female wants, desires and experiences have been sacrificed or repressed. The specifics of temporal demands and limitations on women change over time, as will be discussed in this thesis, but certain expectations regarding female futures remain stubbornly persistent. To name one of this thesis’ central claims: The belief that the temporal destiny of women is marriage and motherhood has remarkable longevity.

In this thesis, I explore the treatment of time in Nella Larsen’s *Passing* (1929), Joan Didion’s *Play It As It Lays* (1970) and Jennifer Egan’s *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2011). I examine how temporality is thematised in story and narrative form. I focus on the temporal paths available to the female characters, and their opportunities for self-determination. I discuss the expectations, demands and limits facing the female characters, and I survey what women must sacrifice and/or repress to operate within the dominant temporal order.

Throughout, I pay particular attention to how the narrative structure underscores the modalities of time that I identify in the three novels.

Central to my thinking on women and temporality are the writings of two critics, Julia Kristeva and Elizabeth Freeman. I take as my point of analytical departure the conception of temporalities put forward in Julia Kristeva's rich and suggestive article, 'Women's Time'. Here, Kristeva distinguishes between linear, cyclical and monumental time. Since antiquity, she argues, linear time has been coded as masculine, while cyclical and monumental time has been rendered feminine. Her claim is that masculine linear time is the dominant temporal scheme of our time. *Chrononormativity* is Elizabeth Freeman's term for how time is used to 'organise individual human bodies toward maximum productivity' (3). Chrononormativity is a process of temporal regulation, whereby an individual is expected to progress through culturally sanctioned life-stages such as adulthood, marriage, parenthood, work, saving and retirement. In her book *Time Binds*, Freeman is deeply engaged with Kristeva's work, and Freeman's notion of chrononormativity links easily and productively with Kristeva's conception of linear time. In my understanding, the dominant temporal order, that is, linear, masculine time, is chrononormative. Linear time is the time of progress and history, of succession and forward movement, while chrononormativity entails the progression through successive and socially acceptable stages of life.

I will argue that all three novels critique the temporal regimes within which women live. Moreover, in the treatment and crafting of time, all three novels convey alternative conceptions of time to the view of time as linear and progressive. I identify a specific modality of time in each work, which is reflected in the novels' narrative structures. Nella Larsen's *Passing* conveys a domestic temporality, where patterns and repetition of household labour and rituals have replaced the biological rhythms of Kristevan generative, cyclical time. The narrative of *Passing* is a tightly structured, closed-circuit system where words, phrases and events are repeated and circulated throughout the text. In *Passing*, time is *ordered*.

In Joan Didion's *Play It As It Lays*, I identify two poles of temporal dynamic. On the one hand, there is a strong emphasis on a reduction of time to the present. On the other, there is an equally strong sense of backwardness, of wanting to return to a previous time or state. In the push to the present, there is no time for the mythical or cyclical time connoted with the feminine. Moreover, Didion portrays a society where there is no acceptance for the mental and bodily experiences particular to women. Patriarchal society denies Maria Wyeth, the main

character, the experience of motherhood, which is central to Kristeva's conception of a regenerative, joyous woman's time. In *Play It*, time is *denied*.

In *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, Jennifer Egan represents multiple temporalities simultaneously by introducing a dual track of cyclical and linear time that runs through the narrative. She makes extensive use of the narrative techniques of flashbacks and foreshadowing, or analepses and prolepses in Gérard Genette's terminology. The effect is an experience of time where past, present and future coexists. In *Goon Squad*, time is *fused*.

In 'Time in literature', J. Hillis Miller asks whether the concern with how time is represented in literature is outdated in a time where much literary focus is directed towards class, race and gender. My answer is, simply, no. A focus on class, race, sexuality or gender does not preclude an interest in time nor render the study of time in literature irrelevant. On the contrary, to combine an interest in temporality with a focus on gender (or class or race or sexuality) can open new appreciations and avenues of analysis. In this thesis, I hope to show that examining the treatment of time from the perspective of gender can bring new insights to two established classics and increased critical appreciation to a third, more recent novel.

Previous critics have interpreted Nella Larsen's *Passing* through the lens of race, gender, class and (lesbian) sexuality. However, to my knowledge, there is no close study of Larsen's use of narrative techniques to order time in *Passing*. I think more attention could usefully be paid to *Passing's* narrative form because it reinforces the problematics of key themes in the novel, especially gender and sexuality. In my view, *Passing* deserves to be read as an elegant and perceptive exploration of different temporal modes and their connoted behaviours.

Maria Wyeth, the main character of Joan Didion's *Play It As It Lays*, has won very little sympathy from critics. They have given Maria a very hard time, as will be discussed in chapter two. Critics see Maria as narcissistic, amoral and wilfully passive. However, few critics have discussed the novel as an indictment of the opportunities for self-determination for women in late 1960s Hollywood. By highlighting the temporal restrictions under which Maria operates and what she is forced to sacrifice and repress by the dominant patriarchal order, I would like to offer a more sympathetic reading of her than what is common in the scholarship on Didion.

In my opinion, Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad* deserves instant recognition as a future classic. I am not alone in my admiration. In the short decade since its

publication in 2010, *Goon Squad* has attracted considerable – and varied – attention from the academy. Critics have focused on themes as diverse as time, music, surveillance, the world of academia and the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attack. Yet, for all the attention devoted to Egan’s innovative treatment of time, there has, as far as I am aware, been no discussion of her conception of time as it relates to women. I wish to contribute to fill this lack. I find the ordering of time in *Goon Squad* to be especially productive because, as I will argue, Egan employs traditional narrative techniques to startlingly original effect. I find Egan’s treatment and representation of time to be truly novel, and in my view, *Goon Squad* opens up new ways of thinking about time in literature for years to come.

In these initial paragraphs, I have tried to sketch out my argument and explain why I consider the study of the treatment of time in *Passing*, *Play It* and *Goon Squad* to be a worthwhile endeavour. In the remainder of this introduction, I will elaborate on my choice of novels, situate the novels in their historical and literary context and review the critical writings that are especially important to this thesis’ analytical framework, namely Julia Kristeva’s ‘Women’s Time’, Elizabeth Freeman’s *Time Binds* and Gérard Genette’s *Narrative Discourse*.

Novels of their time

I think my chosen trio of novels will provide a rich source of analysis for several reasons. The three novels are sourced from distinctive eras of American history and from separate literary periods, and they thematise temporality in strikingly different ways. In this section, I will situate the novels in their historical contexts and give the briefest of introductions to the treatment of time in modernist and postmodernist literature.

The three novels were published at intervals of four decades: *Passing* in 1929, *Play It* in 1970 and *Goon Squad* in 2011. They register major shifts in the possibilities for self-determination for American women. The publication dates correspond to distinct positions on a timeline of first-, second- and third wave feminism. The roaring twenties, depicted in *Passing*, were a period of economic growth, patriotic optimism and increased freedom for women. At the time, the first wave feminists were concerned with gaining rights for women, such as the right to own property and the right to vote. Didion’s *Play It* was published at a time of social unrest, during the heyday of women’s liberation and as the second wave of feminism focused on gaining equal rights and equal opportunities for women. Since the late

1970's and early 1980's, third wave feminists have been sensitive to the differences between women and argued that there is no essential female experience. At the time of *Goon Squad's* publication, on (legal) paper, American women can imagine any future and invent any role for themselves.

The main female characters in the three novels all live in or in proximity to a certain glamour and glitz. Moreover, they are all financially comfortable. In *Passing*, affluent Irene Redfield is at the centre of the Harlem social world, while Clare Kendry is married to a wealthy white man. Maria Wyeth in *Play It* is an actress trying to make it in Hollywood, married and subsequently divorced from a successful movie director and surrounded by movers and shakers in the film business. Much of the *Goon Squad* is set in the music industry, and many of the characters are involved in the making, production or promotion of music. The female characters in my three novels are all more or less middle class, with the exception of Clare Kendry in *Passing*, as will be discussed in more detail in chapter one. Whatever the limits on their possibilities for self-determination, these limits are not primarily caused by immediate pecuniary concerns, as was – and is – the case for so many women throughout history. The female characters I have chosen to study all inhabit positions of privilege. Yet, as this thesis will show, within the privileged and glamorous worlds in which the characters live, there are very real limits on how women are expected to order and spend their present and future time.

Nella Larsen's *Passing* recounts the fall-out from a chance encounter between two women, Irene Redfield and Clare Kendry. Both women are light-skinned enough to pass, but only Clare Kendry has adopted a new identity as a white woman. The encounter is life-altering for both women, for different reasons. Clare wants to reclaim – or at least enjoy – parts of her Black identity, while Irene is beset by fears, emotions and desires that she is both unwilling and unable to comprehend. What follows is a highly polished, beautifully written story that reflects on race, gender, (lesbian) sexuality and, I would add, time.

Passing is set during the Harlem Renaissance, a period of profound cultural change and social transition in the interwar years. The beginnings of the Renaissance coincided with the end of the first world war and the start of the Great Migration. Black soldiers returned from the relative freedom of Europe only to re-encounter the Jim Crow laws of America. During the interwar years, millions of African Americans moved from mostly rural areas in the south to industrial centres in the north, forever changing the social and cultural fabric of northern American cities. In his introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to the Harlem*

Renaissance, George Hutchinson highlights how Harlem emerged as diverse and multicultural, a place to experiment with new modes of thinking and living. Sexuality was one such area of experimentation. David Blackmore, in his study of the homosexual subtexts of *Passing*, notes how a visible black lesbian subculture was established in Harlem during this period (479). Crucial to the Harlem Renaissance, stresses Hutchinson, was a re-evaluation of and pride in black history and heritage. The Harlem 'Vogue' was the term used to refer to the interest some whites took in black arts and culture, and a critique of the Vogue was an essential aspect of the renaissance itself. Nella Larsen, too, offers a critique of the Vogue. However, as evidenced in both her two published novels, *Quicksand* and *Passing*, she is just as scathing against the Harlem elite for what she saw as acts of hypocrisy: How they proclaimed hatred of white people and abhorred of any contact with white society, while imitating their clothes, manners and ways of life (Carby 171).

In 1920s America, marriage was expected for women, but marriage choice was restricted. Women were not really free to marry who they wanted. In New York at the time of *Passing's* publication, mixed-marriages were legal, but were neither common nor popular. Homosexuality was criminalised and same-sex marriages were nearly a century away. In the 1920s, fears of racial degeneracy were on the rise. *Passing* was published four years after the infamous 1925 Rhinelander case, which is briefly mentioned in the novel. In the trial, Leonard Rhinelander requested an annulment of his marriage to Alice Jones on the grounds of 'racial fraud'. But the jury ruled in Alice's favour. As her 'race' was visibly apparent there could be no racial deceit. Rebecca Nisetich argues that 'the verdict served to further codify the concept of race as a visible and incontrovertible fact' (345). It also upheld the one-drop rule as the determinant of race. The 1910s and 1920s were explosive in the contentious area of marriage across the colour line, recounts Nancy Cott in her fascinating history of marriage in the US. In 1930, thirty states still nullified and/or punished marriages between blacks and whites, which leads Cott to assert that 'marriage was the most criminalized form of racially related conduct' (164). Until the Supreme Court decision in *Loving v. Virginia* in 1967, marriage across colour lines was illegal in sixteen states.

Joan Didion's *Play It As It Lays* shows the path to mental breakdown of Maria Wyeth, failed actress, Hollywood divorcee, depressive for the ages. Above all, however, I see Maria as a grief-stricken mother, which I will explain in more detail in chapter two. Maria's young daughter, Kate, is institutionalised, and the medical establishment limits Maria's access to and the amount of time she can spend with her daughter. When Maria becomes pregnant with a

man who is not her husband, her actual husband, Carter, forces her to have an abortion under threat of losing custody of Kate. The abortion proves to be a trauma from which Maria cannot recover, and it accelerates her psychic decline. The novel begins and ends with Maria in a mental hospital.

Didion charts Maria's demise in the sparse, unflinching, at times brutal prose that is a hallmark of her writing. In the course of a career spanning six decades, Joan Didion has authored journalism, essays, screenplays, memoirs and novels. You name it, Didion has written it, often to great critical acclaim. The New York Times called her first collection of essays, *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, published in 1968, 'a rich display of some of the best prose written today'. More than 35 years later, Didion would win a National Book Award for her 2005-memoir *The Year of Magical Thinking*, a testament to her longevity.

Play It As It Lays, with its contemporary setting, was published in 1970, after the sexual revolution of the 1960s and in the early years of the women's liberation movement. It was a time of social and cultural upheaval, of increased sexual freedoms and civil rights. California, where the novel is partly set, was one of the most progressive states both in terms of abortion rights and divorce law. In 1967, California legalised abortion, albeit only in certain circumstances and two years later it became the first U.S state to permit no-fault divorce. It must be stressed that although California's abortion laws were progressive by late 1960s-standards, abortion was only allowed where there was grave threat against the mother's physical or mental health, or in the cases of rape and incest. Maria Wyeth meets none of these requirements, and she has an illegal abortion. Nationally in the years from 1965 to 1980, as the historian Nancy Cott chronicles, demographic indicators changed dramatically: The marriage rate went down, the divorce rates skyrocketed and the number of children born outside wedlock increased. Not least, there was a 'banalisation' of previously condemned behaviour, argues Cott (202).

Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, published in 2010, was an instant critical and commercial success and won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 2011. It is a singular and highly original piece of literature, which is as hard to define as it is to summarise. *Goon Squad* consists of thirteen chapters, some more, some less, interrelated than others. Each chapter could stand on its own as a short story, and several of the stories/chapters had been published independently prior to *Goon Squad*. Each chapter is told from the point of view of a different character, and chapters are written in the first, second and third person. Some

characters reappear throughout the novel, others figure prominently in one chapter, but are never seen again. To me, the variety in style, form and content is awe-inspiring.

Contemporary reviewers were lavish in their praise, highlighting Egan's innovative narrative technique and her rethinking of the age-old literary question of time's effect on characters. To cite just two examples: In *The New York Review of Books*, Cathleen Schine lauds Egan for employing every 'playful device of the postmodern novel with such warmth and sensitivity that the genre is transcended completely'. Schine claims innocence as the theme of the novel: 'Innocence betrayed, innocence lost, innocence fondly or bitterly remembered'. Meanwhile, Pankaj Mishra, in the *London Review of Books*, points to how Egan combines the virtues of the realist tradition – irony, historical texture and a strong point of view – with a modernist aesthetic of fragmentation and dissolution. She labels *Goon Squad* a 'polyphonic novel' with an underlying vision of 'the impersonal tyranny of a mass, technicised society.'

But is *Goon Squad* really a novel? It is genre-defying, and the conundrum of what to label it has busied many a reviewer, interviewer and critic. Is it a novel, a tale, a mosaic, a linked story-collection, a book or, simply, a text? Jennifer Smith sees the thirteen discrete, but interconnected chapters as a short story cycle, while Heather Humann calls them 'interrelated vignettes' (85). Although labels and definitions can be useful for literary analysis and discussion, the question of what to call *Goon Squad* is not my concern in this thesis. The fight to fit *Goon Squad* into one genre or another is not my battle here. To me, what's important is *Goon Squad's* distinctiveness. It is Egan's daring and experimentation that I wish to highlight.

Perhaps *Goon Squad* is best described by abandoning traditional literary epithets altogether in favour of music terminology. In a text where punk rock is a constant presence, *Goon Squad* can be seen as a concept album. Its two parts – or sides, if you will – A and B, mirror the two separate sides of a vinyl record. As Jessica Jernigan notes, in *Goon Squad* the A part/side is made up fairly conventional short stories: 'The B-side, though, is the place for experimentation – for studio outtakes, for tracks too weird for the album, the musical in-jokes that only real fans will appreciate' (5). Part B is the place for narratological experimentation. There is a chapter told in PowerPoint slides, a telling of an assault told from the point-of-view of the assailant and an account of how to make a genocidal dictator palatable to the American public. Throughout the novel, as I will argue, Egan orders narrative time in ways that point to the future of literary art.

Goon Squad is all about time (time is the ‘goon’ of Egan’s title), but as with *Passing* and *Play It*, it was published at a particular and distinctive moment of US history. Jennifer Smith and Aaron DeRossa are two critics who see *Goon Squad* as a contemplation of the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Smith argues that September 11th ‘ruptured time’ in the lives of the characters, and that the attacks loom in the novel’s chronology as ‘somehow a lack and a presence’ (154). For example, in chapter two, ‘The Gold Cure’, Sasha looks at the empty space where the Twin Towers had been, and says there should be ‘*something*’ there, ‘like an echo or an outline’ (Egan 38). In Smith’s view, 9/11 is what echoes through *Goon Squad*. DeRossa interprets the novel as a response to shifts in Americans’ view of the future. Whereas before 9/11, the overarching narrative of American history was a teleological one of progress towards an exceptional future world, the attacks shattered this illusion. Now, ‘America’s anxiety over its lost future necessitates new scenarios’, writes DeRossa (98). To him, Egan’s novel is one such reconsideration of America’s future. DeRossa characterises *Goon Squad* as ‘proleptic nostalgia fiction’, that is a narrative that longs for a future exceptional status that will now never come to be (89).

Nella Larsen’s *Passing* on the one hand, and Joan Didion’s *Play It* and Jennifer Egan’s *Goon Squad* on the other, represent two distinct literary periods, modernism and postmodernism. I will make no attempt here at a detailed discussion of these vast literary terms, the most rudimentary of summaries will have to suffice.

First, the commonalities of modernism and postmodernism. In an article about the paradox of temporality in modernist and postmodern aesthetics, the German critic Herbert Grabes writes that the entire literary aesthetic of the twentieth century has been largely characterised by the attempt to write against time *as succession* (370). Both modernist and postmodern writers have revolted against narratives where events and appearances are structured in a linear sequence. They have sought to escape the questions of ‘what will this lead to?’ or ‘what does it come from?’ What interests modernist and postmodern writers, argues Grabes, are questions of interdependencies and patterns beyond fleeting experiences (373). This rings true for all my three chosen novels. None of them present a linear plot, all hint at underlying temporal patterns.

Second, the differences. In ‘The End of Temporality’, Frederic Jameson argues that modernism was a period characterised by uneven development and incomplete modernisation. Therefore, modernist writers were keenly aware of a multitude of temporalities. Postmodernist writers, by contrast, live in a world that is more completely modernised. They

no longer shuffle back and forth between distinct temporalities. Jameson claims that while in modernism there was differences and multitudes of time, in postmodernism there is a waning sense of past and future. Similarly, in *Chronoschisms*, Ursula Heise points to how modernist artists during the first decades of the twentieth century were concerned with the schism between a public, linear time and a private, non-linear temporality. Modernist writers such as Proust, Woolf and Joyce used recall, memory and stream-of-consciousness to explore this private temporality, argues Heise (13). Nella Larsen's name could justifiably be added to this list. *Passing* depicts Irene Redfield's attempts to conform to the dominant, linear temporal order, and how her struggle to conform is continually thwarted and interrupted by past memories and undefined desires.

In postmodernism, however, according to Heise, the concern is no longer a present split between the public and private, but whether the present is disintegrating to the point where only the instantaneous and simultaneous remain. As I will argue, in Didion's *Play It*, the dominant temporal mode involves a push to live in the present only, with no reference to past or future. The reduction of time to the present is a characteristically postmodernist concern, as I will discuss in chapter two. Regarding *Goon Squad*, I find that Egan, through her employment of analepses and prolepses, fuses modernist conceptions of the role of recall and memory with postmodernist experiences of the present as instantaneous and as a mode of anticipation. *Goon Squad* transcends both genres and literary periods.

Theorising time

Passing, *Play It As It Lays* and *A Visit from the Goon Squad* are strikingly different novels, and their treatment of time varies greatly. I think it would be reductive to employ one sole methodological approach to the study of such polyvalent works. Moreover, in a thesis which above all is concerned with variations and multitudes of time and temporalities, I find it suitable to discuss time and temporalities in multiple ways. To exemplify, in my first two chapters, on *Passing* and *Play It* respectively, I use insights from psychoanalytic theory, but this theoretical approach is not employed in my chapter on *Goon Squad*. In chapter two, on *Play It*, Cathy Caruth's and Judith Herman's works on trauma theory are used to discuss temporality, but trauma theory does not figure prominently in my discussion of time in *Passing* nor in *Goon Squad*.

My third and final chapter, on *Goon Squad*, marks an analytical shift. What especially interests me in *Goon Squad* is the innovative ordering of time, the structure of Egan's narrative. I will therefore do a more stringent narratological analysis of *Goon Squad* than of the two other novels. One of this thesis' key claims is that Egan reinvents traditional narrative technique to convey the coexistence of linear and circular time. An in-depth discussion of Egan's use of narrative devices is necessary to support this claim. In the chapter on *Goon Squad*, I draw heavily on works by Ursula Heise and Mark Currie, who both theorise time, narrative and postmodernism.

That said, for analysis of all three novels I rely on insights from key theorists of time and temporality. Julia Kristeva's 'Women's Time', Elizabeth Freeman's notion of chrononormativity and Gérard Genette's theory of narrative discourse will be referenced throughout. A brief overview of this common analytical framework is now in order.

Julia Kristeva's seminal essay 'Women's Time' was published in English in 1981, two years after it first appeared in French. This rich and complex work begins as a meditation on time and temporality. From there, it branches out to analyse feminism as an international movement in the 1970s and meditate on language and the sociosymbolic order, female terrorism, motherhood and literature. Among other things. Of particular relevance to my thesis is Kristeva's thinking on time and motherhood. I will provide a more detailed review of Kristeva's ideas about motherhood in chapter two, where I discuss Maria Wyeth's experiences with maternity. For now, I will limit my presentation to Kristeva's reflections on time.

Since antiquity, argues Kristeva, time has been rendered masculine, space feminine. 'When evoking the name and destiny of women, one thinks more of the *space* generating and forming the human species than of *time*, becoming, or history', she writes (15). Kristeva distinguishes between linear, cyclical and monumental time. The former is 'time as a project, teleology, linear and prospective unfolding; time as departure, progression and arrival – in other words, the time of history' (17). This is the dominant temporal order of our time. But alternative temporalities exist:

On the one hand, there are cycles, gestation, the eternal recurrence of a biological rhythm which conforms to that of nature and imposes a temporality whose stereotyping may shock, but whose regularity and unison with what is experienced as extrasubjective time, cosmic time, occasion vertiginous visions and unnameable *jouissance*. On the other hand (...) there is massive presence of a monumental

temporality, without cleavage or escape, which has so little to do with linear time (which passes) that the very word “temporality” hardly fits. (16)

Kristeva argues that cyclical and monumental time have traditionally been linked to female subjectivity. Women are correlated with the endless return of cyclical time, as well as the stasis of monumental time. The time of progress is masculine, the time of repetition and eternity is feminine. The current temporal order, Kristeva labels as masculine.

Kristeva considers the sociosymbolic contract as a contract of sacrifice. To live in society, certain thoughts, actions, feelings must be given up. The problem, for Kristeva, is that women ‘are forced to experience this sacrificial contract against their will’ (25). As Alice Jardine stresses in her introduction to the English publication of Kristeva’s essay, Kristeva rejects any thought that minimises the gender differences intrinsic to the structures that form how we live and think (Jardine 11). Similarly, Russel West-Pavlov emphasises how Kristeva’s main critique is aimed at the way in which society places the main burden of ‘castration’ upon women (109). In other words, Kristeva claims that the dominant, linear, masculine temporal order is particularly limiting to women. Kristeva calls for the reintroduction of a cyclical, generative and creative temporal order. Her aim is to merge a cyclical women’s time with a linear masculine time.

Naturally, not everyone agrees with Kristeva’s conception of time. Rita Felski is one critic who takes issue with Kristeva’s vision of cyclical and monumental temporalities as existing *beyond* linear time. In *Doing Time*, her study of feminist theory and postmodernist culture, Felski argues that both cyclical and linear time are integral to social life. She points to how all cultures rely on repetition and ritual. In her view, repetition takes place within rather than outside the irreversibility of time. Thus, linear and cyclical time are not two separate temporal modes. Quite the opposite, they are mutually implicated and interdependent, claims Felski (20). She rejects the dramatic contrast drawn by Kristeva between male historical time and the repetitive everyday time of women. As Felski notes, there is plenty of repetition in men’s lives as well: ‘The realm of everyday life simply *is* repetition, being largely defined by monotony, routine, habit’ (20). Gender has little to do with it.

Moreover, according to Felski, the perception of cyclical time as essentially female is misleading. This idea stems from the, in Felski’s opinion, outdated view of women as more closely related to nature. But, as Felski drily notes, there is nothing particularly natural about the routines of Western women; the commute to work, the shopping, the tv-show in the evening (20). Felski makes a convincing case that rather than being elemental creatures

attuned to natural rhythms, many women in our day and age are more preoccupied with time measurement than men. For working mothers, especially, time is a precious commodity. I think Felski has a valid point. Modern women are more attuned to the clocks and schedules than their bodily rhythms.

Elizabeth Freeman's term *chrononormativity* refers to the notion that an individual's life should unfold in a timely pattern dictated by cultural and societal norms. In *Time Binds*, Freeman defines chrononormativity as a process through which time is used to 'organise individual human bodies toward maximum productivity' (3). As culture and society change, so do the standards of chrononormativity. An American woman in the 1920s, for example, would most often be expected to go from adolescence through courtship to marriage and motherhood. Today, the chrononormative process for women could be expanded to include education, employment, saving and retirement. Whatever the particulars of the process, chrononormativity entails that life consists of a series of successive stages, to be progressed at the appropriate time. To delay or forego life-stages altogether is deemed unproductive, and is thus ill-accepted by society. The idea that time must be productive is intimately linked to chrononormativity. A productive life is a series of stepping stones to a better future. As Freeman writes, 'the past seems useless unless it predicts and becomes material for a future' (5).

Narrative Discourse presents Gérard Genette's structuralist theory of narrative. Genette opens his first chapter with a quote from Christian Metz: 'Narrative is a doubly temporal sequence. There is the time of the thing told and the time of the narrative. (...) This duality invites us to consider that one of the functions of narrative is to invent one time scheme in terms of another time scheme.' (qtd. 33) Genette distinguishes between story, what happens, and narrative, how the story is told. To study the relation between story-time and narrative-time, Genette distinguishes between order, duration and frequency.

Under the heading of 'order', Genette discusses the relations between the succession of events in the story and their order in the narrative. Narrative anachronies is his term for the various types of discordances between the ordering of events in the story and in the narrative. An anachrony occurs any time the order of the narrative diverges from the order of the story. Genette classifies anachronies into backward-looking (analepses) and forward-looking (prolepses). An anachrony can reach into the past or the future, either more or less far from the "present" moment. The temporal distance is the anachrony's *reach*. The duration of story time while looking forward or back is the anachrony's *extent*. A prolepsis is defined as any

narrative move that narrates or evokes in advance an event that will take place later. According to Genette and Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, in the Western tradition, prolepses are used less frequently than analepses. However, claims Mark Currie in *About Time*, there has been an enormous increase in the use of prolepsis in fiction in the last three decades (22). Jennifer Egan's *Goon Squad* can be used to support Currie's point, and in chapter three of this, I will pay specific attention to Egan's use of prolepses.

Under the heading 'duration', Genette studies the time the events of the story are supposed to have taken and the 'pseudo-duration', that is the length of text, devoted to their telling in the narrative (35). In this context, Genette theorises a gradation from the infinite speed of 'ellipsis', where duration of the story is left out of the narrative, to the absolute slowness of 'descriptive pause' (93). In between are two intermediaries, scene and summary, which both can have variable tempo (94). Finally, under 'frequency', Genette studies the relation between the number of times an event appears in the story and the amount of times it is narrated in the text. As Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan notes in *Narrative Fiction*, Genette was the first to identify frequency as a temporal component in narrative (57). In particular, this thesis will reference the narrative technique which Genette calls the *iterative*. The iterative is where the narrative tells once what happened frequently. As Genette states, the iterative is linked to a sharp sense of habit and repetition.

This thesis has three chapters. In my first chapter, I examine the treatment of time in Nella Larsen's *Passing*. The modalities of time in Joan Didion's *Play It As It Lays* is the topic of chapter two. My third and final chapter is devoted to an analysis of the crafting of time in Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad*.

Chapter 1:

Nella Larsen's *Passing*: Time Ordered

Irene Redfield has a hard time with time. In her hyper-ordered life, she struggles to find enough time and the right time. She has 'complete confidence in her own good judgement and tact' (92), but her timing is off and her sense of time distorted. Always running late, she passes her days in an endless loop of lunches and teas, dinner and dances. Her calendar is packed, with little time to reflect upon the past or imagine a different future. Her routines are well-established, her habits impeccable. It is just as Irene wants it. Her habits and routines effectively repress untimely thoughts and desires. At least, that is the idea.

For Irene Redfield wants 'only to be tranquil' (169), to enjoy her respectable present and avoid changes and ruptures that could affect 'the smooth routine of her household' (86). But her tranquillity is under threat, from within and without. Her husband is unhappy, restless, dreaming of a different life. And when Irene meets her old friend, Clare Kendry, she experiences a 'sudden inexplicable unrush of affectionate feeling' (96). Long-repressed and unvoiced wants and desires return and wreak havoc on Irene's supremely ordered life. Before Clare, Irene was able to suppress her sexuality and deny all thoughts and dreams of a different future to the chrononormative temporal path mapped out ahead of her. After Clare, Irene's powers of repression fall short. The narrative of *Passing* tracks and reflects Irene's struggle to repress both sexual desire and thoughts of the future.

My aim in this chapter is two-fold. First, to discuss the futures available to the two main female characters in the novel and their opportunities for self-determination. Second, to highlight how Nella Larsen crafts time in *Passing*. Critics such as Lori Harrison-Kahan and Judith Butler discuss, rather briefly, the use of ellipses in the novel, but to my knowledge, there is no close study of the narrative techniques at work to order time in *Passing*. I think more attention could usefully be paid to the narrative structure because it reinforces the problematics of key themes in the novel, especially gender and sexuality. In my view, *Passing* deserves also to be read as an elegant and perceptive exploration of different temporal modes and their connoted behaviours.

I will argue that the novel reflects a struggle with the dominant conception of time: The view of time as linear and progressive, a temporality that Julia Kristeva codes as

masculine. Irene Redfield is firmly invested in the reigning, masculine temporal order, but she is unable to completely conform to it. I interpret Irene's habitual lateness as her unconscious resistance to the demands of linear time. Kristeva links alternative temporalities, cyclical and monumental time, to the feminine. I do see alternative temporalities reflected in Larsen's novel. Especially, there is a strong sense of habit and repetition, emphasised by the extensive use of repetition as a narrative technique. The repetition hints at an experience of time as recurring and cyclical.

However, whereas to Kristeva cyclical women's time is a generative and creative temporality, the cyclical time portrayed in *Passing* bears little of Kristeva's optimism and hope for creativity and rebirth. On the contrary, the circularity of Irene Redfield's life, her routines and repetitions, stifle creativity and crush opportunities for a rethinking of life, self and the future. Regarding *Passing*, it is Kristeva's claim of the 'shocking stereotyping' (16) of a cyclical, female temporality that rings most true.

I find Elizabeth Freeman's notion of a domestic temporality to offer a more useful framework for thinking about the treatment of time in Larsen's novel. As Freeman explains in *Time Binds*, domestic temporality is circular and repetitive, just as Kristeva's feminine cyclical time. However, theorises Freeman, in domestic temporality, patterns and repetition of household labour and rituals have replaced the biological rhythms that are integral to Kristeva's understanding of a generative, cyclical time. Domestic temporality is disembodied because it is removed from the biological and natural rhythms that figure so prominently in Kristeva's conception of women's time.

In turn, argues Freeman, domestic, cyclical time offers a new version of monumental time. To Kristeva, monumental time is 'without cleavage or escape' (16). It is constant and eternal. In Freeman's reworking, the effect of timeless, monumental time is produced by conforming to proper schedules and routines. Routines and repetition, the stasis of domesticity, give the impression of timelessness or of time standing still. In *Passing*, Irene Redfield wants not 'only to be tranquil', but also, I would add, to be timeless. She dreads the future and wants to forget the past. Irene wants exactly what Elizabeth Freeman describes as domestic/monumental time: 'A tranquil household marked by (...) smooth transitions, recurrent rituals, and safety from accidents and untimely intrusions from the outside world' (40). To Irene, security is 'the most important and desired thing in life' (169). The narrative will show just how tenuous that security is and how high a price Irene must pay for it.

I will read *Passing* as a novel of repression. To retain her respectable position as wife and mother in the upper echelons of Harlem society, Irene must repress her sexuality and her dreams of a different future. She denies her lesbian desires in order to conform to chrononormative ideals of heterosexual matrimony and motherhood. Moreover, she sacrifices any potential for her – and her husband – to craft an alternative future for themselves. Irene buys into the notion of racial progress linked to class mobility, masculine uplift and the bourgeois family. She represses all thoughts and dreams of an alternative future freed from the temporal demands of bourgeois society.

If frigid and rigid Irene Redfield can be seen as the epitome of repression, Clare Kendry is the exact opposite. Clare wants what she wants and she wants it now, danger and risk be damned. With her ‘having way’, Clare is everything Irene is not. A number of critics see Clare as the id to Irene’s ego. I find the psychoanalytic perspective interesting, and I think it can offer insights on the treatment of time in the novel. The id ignores categories of time and space and treats differences as they were identical (Storr 47). Clare dares to imagine – and pursue – a different future than the one society expects of her, at great risk. She pays no heed to the cultural insistence on the difference between black and white. Clare is born Black, but she reinvents herself as white, and marries a white man. When that proves to be unsatisfactory, Clare attempts to reinvent herself once more, and carve out a life where she is not limited by race. By contrast, the ego, which Irene personifies, is concerned with self-preservation. It employs reason, common sense and *the power to delay* immediate responses to external stimuli (Storr 47, my italics). As I see it, the id/Clare ignores time, the ego/Irene attempts to order time.

The narrative form of *Passing* reflects both the competing impulses of the ego and the id and the theme of repression. On the one hand, Larsen’s narrative is tightly structured and elegantly written. On the other, there are repetitions, back-and-forths and simplistic syntax. The firmly ordered narrative gives, in critic Claudia Tate’s phrase, an ‘obvious artificiality’ to the novel (142), which I think mirrors the artificiality of Irene’s life. In *Chronoschisms*, Ursula Heise points to how modernist artists during the first decades of the twentieth century were concerned with the schism between a public, linear time and a private, non-linear temporality (13). In *Passing*, Nella Larsen employs recall and memory to explore this private temporality. Through narrative techniques to order time, in particular the use of recall and repetition, Larsen shows the futility of Irene’s desire to ignore her past and future and live solely in the present.

In this chapter, I will, first, examine how critics have interpreted *Passing* through the lens of race, gender, class and (lesbian) sexuality. I will pay particular attention to the repression of lesbian desire. Second, I will discuss Elizabeth Freeman's conception of a cyclical domestic temporality which I think is a useful framework for reflecting upon the treatment of time in *Passing*. Third, I will discuss the futures available to the novel's two main female characters and their opportunities for self-determination. Finally, I will argue that *Passing* is a narrative of repression. Throughout the chapter, I will make use of Gérard Genette's *Narrative Discourse* to analyse narrative structure and technique.

***Passing* as cover story**

Published in 1929, *Passing* was long regarded as one of the lesser texts of the Harlem Renaissance, as well as the lesser of Larsen's two published novels. The end of the 1970's marked the beginning of a renewed critical interest in Larsen's work, especially from feminist critics who worked to expand the literary canon to include texts written not only by white men. Since then, Larsen has received high praise for her ability to dramatize questions of race, gender, jealousy and female desire. She has also been consistently criticised for her novels' endings. Larsen's heroines, Helga Crane in *Quicksand* and Clare Kendry and Irene Redfield in *Passing*, meet the most traditional and conventional of narrative endings: Marriage and/or death.

The critic Deborah McDowell laments that Larsen does not dare to push the lesbian narrative in *Passing* to conclusion and instead reverts to conformity. A narrative that could have explored female sexual desire and self-determination opts for the safe option: The story of the tragic mulatto. Not all critics agree. Claudia Tate, for one, takes issue with the tragic mulatto interpretation not only because it is not supported by the novel's content, she argues, but because it does disservice to Larsen's craft. Tate lauds the ending of the novel as attesting to 'Larsen's consummate skill in dramatizing psychological ambiguity' (146). I agree with Tate's interpretation, and I wish to contribute to a further appreciation of Nella Larsen's narrative skill.

The cover of the 1971 Collier-edition refers to *Passing* as 'the tragic story of a beautiful light-skinned mulatto passing for white in high society' (qtd in Tate 142). Since then, much ink has been spilt to show that the novel is much more than a tragic story about the social position of the mulatto. So much ink in fact, that both Mae Henderson and Nell

Sullivan in more recent studies caution against seeing the question of race in *Passing* as no more than a pretext to examine other issues. Sullivan maintains that for Larsen, race is inextricable from class, gender and sexuality, all factors that influence the formation of identity (373). I agree.

The past decades, critical readings of *Passing* have focused on race, psychology, class, gender and lesbian sexuality. Claudia Tate, Cheryl Wall and Deborah McDowell all argue that Larsen deploys a cover story based on race to conceal a deeper, more complex narrative. To Claudia Tate, racial issues are ‘at best peripheral to the story’ (143). She objects to reading *Passing* as a classic stereotypical tale of the tragic mulatto. She notes that the conventional tragic mulatto is a character who reveals pangs of anguish from forsaking her Black identity (142). Clare, however, reveals no such feelings, and does not seem to be seeking out Blacks in order to regain racial pride or identity (142). Clare is ‘merely looking for excitement’, argues Tate (142).

For her part, Cheryl Wall considers that Larsen subverts the trope of the tragic mulatto in literature. Larsen’s mulattos are not noble nor long-suffering, and they do not symbolise the subjection of blacks. Rather, the tragedy for Irene and Clare is the impossibility of self-definition. Wall argues that Larsen’s female characters assume false identities that ensure social survival but result in psychological suicide (98). To Wall, passing represents both the loss of racial identity and the denial of self required of women who conform to restrictive gender roles (105). In Wall’s appreciation, Larsen exposes the ‘sham that is middle-class security’ (109).

In her much-cited introduction to the novels of Nella Larsen, Deborah McDowell interprets *Passing* as a story of lesbian sexuality that ‘passes’ itself off as a story of race. Underneath the surface story of Clare’s passing and related issues of racial identity and loyalty, there is the more dangerous story ‘of Irene’s awakening sexual desire for Clare’ (xxvi). McDowell argues that Irene effectively displaces her own desires for Clare in her ‘imagination of an affair between Clare and Brian’ (xxviii). Judith Butler, too, reads *Passing* as a story of lesbian desire, and stresses how that desire is mute and repressed. She observes that ‘the muteness of homosexuality converges in the story with the intelligibility of Clare’s blackness’ (*Bodies* 175). In Butler’s reading, Irene passes her desire for Clare through Brian, and part of her jealousy is anger that he occupies a legitimated sexual position vis a vis Clare (*Bodies* 179). For his part, David Blackmore claims that McDowell and other critics overlook ‘intimations of homosexual desire on the part of Brian’. Blackmore concentrates especially on

Brian's desire to move to Brazil, a country where homosexuality is more permissible. Irene's obsessive fear that Brian will in fact escape to Brazil 'functions as both an analogue and a cover for her anxieties about his sexual orientation,' writes Blackmore (477).

A central challenge facing Larsen was how to write about black female sexuality. She was confronted with the cultural stereotype of the Black Jezebel. Racist sexual ideologies proclaimed the black woman to be a rampant sexual being. The dilemma facing Larsen, argue both Deborah McDowell and David Blackmore, was how to tell a story of black women with sexual desires while at the same time combating the myth of black women's sexual licentiousness. McDowell holds that black women writers of the nineteenth and twentieth century responded to this myth by being reticent about sex. Moreover, they took care to stress the female characters chastity (xiii). Similarly, Hazel Carby argues that black women writers focused on defending the morality of their characters or displaced sexuality onto another terrain (174). The result was that female sexuality and desire was repressed or denied.

I think the attention given to 'the ritual of tea' (138) in *Passing* is relevant in terms of how Larsen deals with the myth of black women's sexual licentiousness. In *The Flesh Made Word*, Helena Michie writes of 'ladylike anorexia' in the nineteenth century. Michie links hunger, sexuality and appetite. In the Victorian era, rich and spicy food were equated with lust, and foods themselves were assigned a gender (15). By far the most feminine food – or meal – was tea. By contrast, rich, meaty or very spicy foods were identified as male. Michie argues that an image emerged of the appropriately sexed woman as one 'who eats little and delicately' (17). These connotations still existed in the 1920s, when Larsen was writing, as they do today.

Clare and Irene meet for tea three times during the novel; at the Drayton, at Clare's hotel and at Irene's tea party. The drinking of tea emphasises Clare's and Irene's femininity, their existence in a female, domestic realm, closed off to men. The ritual of tea is women's time in women's world. It is also worth noting that neither Irene and Clare eat very much. The reader learns that Irene eats toast and grapefruit for breakfast, while Clare has a melon on the Drayton roof-top. Toast and fruit are eminently feminine, safe foods. Judging by what they eat and drink, Clare and Irene are respectable ladies, appropriately sexed. Larsen, like other black women writers, takes care to stress her female characters' respectability and represses their sexuality.

In Irene Redfield, Larsen created a character who has internalised the taboo of sexual desire. To Irene, to be respectable is to be asexual. Irene and her husband, Brian, sleep in separate bedrooms. There is no indication of any kind of intimacy – sexual or otherwise – between the two spouses. Irene senses that there is ‘some wild extasy that she had never known’ (169), but she does not care to explore her sexuality. Nell Sullivan stresses how desire is a symptom of lack, and she argues that Irene’s desire for security throughout the novel reveals the instability of Irene’s self, the instability of the I (377). Irene’s sense of self is tenuous. She does not know who she is outside her prescribed role of respectable and asexual Black wife and mother, and she fears finding out. That is why meeting Clare Kendry is so shattering to Irene. Her feelings for Clare cannot be reconciled with her identity as wife and mother; Irene’s self cannot contain her desires for Clare.

To live up to her respectable position as Mrs. Brian Redfield, Irene must suppress her desire for Clare. However, I think Irene not only harbours erotic desires for Clare, but that Irene also desires Clare’s *whiteness*. Lori Harrison-Kahan emphasises how Irene continually denies her desire for Clare, but also how she denies her desire for whiteness (123). Nell Sullivan points to how Clare claims Irene as her link to blackness, while ‘Irene mediates her desire for whiteness through Clare’ (375). I agree with these readings. Clare passes by adopting a white identity, while Irene passes by adopting bourgeois habits and white values. Coming onto the rooftop of the Drayton, Irene thinks it is ‘like being wafted upward on a magic carpet to another world, pleasant, quiet’ (12). That other, pleasant world of the Drayton rooftop is also, of course, a *white* world. Also, it can be argued that Irene has adopted white standards of beauty. When Irene asks her husband whether he agrees that Clare is ‘extraordinarily beautiful’ (121), Brian demurs and says he prefers his ‘ladies darker’ (122). Irene, however, is attracted to Clare’s ‘pale gold hair’ and ‘ivory skin’ with its ‘peculiar soft lustre’ (37). Irene is even incapable of completely denouncing Clare’s bigot husband, conceding that ‘under other conditions she may have liked him’ (60). Clare says she’s often wondered why Irene never ‘passed over’ (31). Maybe Irene wonders, too.

None of the critics discussed here pay much attention to the structure and treatment of time in Larsen’s novel. I think this is a regrettable oversight in the existing literature on *Passing*. As I hope to show, the ordering of time underscores the novel’s key themes of gender and sexuality.

Cyclical domesticity

Passing can be interpreted as Irene Redfield's struggle with time. In the novel, different temporalities coexist. There is a masculine linear time linked to progress and racial uplift, and there is what Elizabeth Freeman calls a feminine domestic temporality, characterised by routine and repetition. Within both temporal templates, there are specific temporal demands of women. Irene is unable to completely conform to either of them.

Since antiquity, argues Julia Kristeva, time has been rendered masculine, space feminine. 'When evoking the name and destiny of women, one thinks more of the *space* generating and forming the human species than of *time*, becoming, or history', she writes (15). Women are correlated with the endless return of cyclical time, as well as the stasis of monumental time. In *Time Binds*, Elizabeth Freeman builds on Kristeva's work. Here, Freeman argues that during industrialisation, a secularised cyclical temporality emerged, which offers a new version of monumental time.

Before industrialisation, marriage and the household were important centres of economic production, as goods were produced in the home and family members all contributed labour, writes the historian Christina Simmons (6). During the 1800s, the factory system replaced households as the key centre of production. Victorian men had to leave the house to go to work, Victorian women stayed at home. As a result, two distinct spheres developed: The male, public and the female, domestic sphere. Men were expected to provide for a home, women to make one. As a result, claims Freeman, the family and family life were no longer constituted through the rhythms of its labour and Sabbath-keeping, but 'manifested itself through its own separate hourly, daily, weekly, and yearly calendar of leisure activities' (39). It is this secularised cyclical time Freeman sees as a new form of monumental time. The proper maintenance of cyclical schedules and routines 'produce the effect of timelessness' (40).

Freeman argues that during industrialisation domestic time emerged as a 'disembodied, secularized, and hypervisualized version of Kristeva's 'women's time'' (45). Domestic time is disembodied because the biological rhythms that anchor Kristevan cyclical time have been replaced by patterns of household labour and ritual. The ideas of female static timelessness are echoed in film critic Thomas Elsaesser's work on family melodramas. This is a film genre which almost by definition is set in homes like Irene Redfield's: Middle class and filled with objects. Elsaesser highlights how bourgeois households attempt to make time stand

still, immobilise life and to establish bulwarks against the more disturbing sides of human nature (84). It is a fitting description of Irene Redfield's household: Proper routine is paramount, improper topics of conversation – such as sex and race – are banished.

In *Passing*, the domestic temporality of women coexists with a dominant, masculine temporality of teleology and progress. Irene Redfield buys into the culturally and socially sanctioned idea of progress as racial uplift and bourgeois respectability. Irene is firmly invested in the dominant, linear temporal mode. She manages her and her family's time efficiently and productively, in synchronicity with the temporal demands of her social world. In 'Women's Time', Julia Kristeva explains linear time as 'departure, progression and arrival – in other words, the time of history' (17). This view of time is echoed in Elizabeth Freeman's notion of chrononormativity, which refers to how there are social expectations of how we should spend our days, weeks and months. Additionally, society sets standards for what we are supposed to do at certain points of our lives, for example at what age women should get married and have children. In other words, the process of chrononormativity entails standards for when to depart, in what order to progress and the point of arrival, the constituents of Kristeva's notion of linear time.

Irene has departed from her respectable middle-class childhood in Chicago, and progressed through the socially accepted, heteronormative stages of marriage and childbirth. And at the start of the novel, Irene has arrived. She is where she wants to be, supposedly. She tells herself and others that she has 'everything I want' (36). Irene has the husband with a respectable profession, the two young sons and the secure position at the top of Harlem society. She is what Elizabeth Freeman would term a properly temporalized body, a body that has internalised the demands of a chronobiological society. That is a society where marriage, work, saving and childrearing are the socially sanctioned and economically productive phases of adult life (Freeman 5).

Irene is a properly temporalized body who masters the temporal codes of her society. Elizabeth Freeman references Pierre Bourdieu's work on habitus and underscores how cultural competence, in terms of knowing when to give and when to receive, is a matter of timing. 'Subjectivity emerges in part through mastering the cultural norms of withholding, delay, surprise, pause and knowing when to stop – through mastery over certain forms of time,' writes Freeman (4). Irene Redfield is nothing if not culturally competent, and she knows well how she *ought to* master her time. But she cannot completely live up to temporal expectations. In the course of the novel, as Irene's inner turmoil increases, she loses her

control over time. For example, at the tea-party after Irene's first suspicion of an affair between Brian and Clare, Irene promises herself for three different dinners 'all on the same evening and at almost the same hour' (143). Irene's sense of self is shaken to the core, and her inner distress is visible in how she fails to master time.

I see Irene's habitual lateness as a symbol of her struggle with linear, progressive time. Furthermore, I think her lateness can be interpreted as an unconscious resistance to the temporal demands placed on women. 'Characteristically' (10), Irene has put off shopping gifts for her boys until only a few crowded days remain of her long visit to Chicago. The good mother is behind schedule, and not for the first time. 'I always seem to keep C.P. time, don't I?' (165) she asks when she is late yet again, inadvertently suggesting that there might be other tempos, other ways to arrange her time and order her life. Additionally, Irene's lateness is a source of great frustration to her husband. The narrator notes several times how Irene's lateness annoys Brian. Again, I think Irene is unconsciously lodging a protest against the patriarchal order. Irene will not sleep with Brian and she will not fulfil his demand for punctuality. I think lateness and denial of sex are two of very few avenues open to Irene to register resistance.

In *Passing*, Nella Larsen employs the narrative technique of repetition to underscore the repetitive and monotonous nature of Irene's days. A circular, repetitive women's time is conveyed by Irene's habits, the regularities of behaviour that fills her day. Throughout the novel, what keeps Irene occupied is planning, preparing for and attending parties. She also spends a large amount of time shopping: In Chicago she hunts for gifts for her sons, after her quarrel with Brian she goes to the printing-shop, then heads downtown to find a new dress. In the final chapter, Irene meets Mr. Bellew as she is shopping with Elise Freeland. She 'aimlessly' wanders the Harlem streets 'long after she had ordered the flowers which had been her excuse for setting out' (130). Routines and habits give order and structure to Irene's life, just as repetition provides structure in the narrative.

In his essay 'Time in Literature', J. Hillis Miller discusses how figurative language is used in literature to represent unknowable, human temporality. Through language, we transform time into space. Nowhere is the spatialisation of time more apparent than in the movement of the clock's hands through space. As Hillis Miller points out, there is a lot of clockwatching in literature. *Passing* is no exception. Irene is keenly attuned to the passage of (linear) time, of its duration and markers. When they meet on the roof of the Dayton hotel, Irene spends an hour or more filling Clare in on the marriages, births and deaths of people she

used to know, until a clock strikes somewhere outside and brings Irene ‘back to the present’ (26). She immediately looks down on her watch, and realises she is late again. Further on, when Clare insistently calls to invite her to tea, Irene notes that the telephone has rung like something possessed since ‘nine o’clock’(42). Irene is in thrall to the demands of clocks and watches, schedules and calendars, which Elizabeth Freeman identifies as the instruments of chrononormativity.

Irene’s attention to temporal duration is reflected in the ordering of time in the novel. There are gaps, ellipses, in the narrative, but often the length of the gap is indicated. In Gérard Genette’s terminology, these are explicit ellipses, where the length of the lapse of time is given. For example, in *Passing*, two years have passed since the women’s encounter in Chicago. Five days go by from Irene’s receipt of Clare’s second letter until Clare shows up at her door. The duration of story time which has been left out of the narrative is explicitly indicated. This underscores Irene’s attention to clock-time and scheduling.

I find it fitting that Larsen employs the narrative technique of the iterative in *Passing*, where so much of Irene Redfield’s life is constituted by habit and repetition. Genette defines the iterative as telling once what happens many times. In his analysis of Proust’s *Remembrance of Things Past*, Genette reinterprets large parts of the first section of this work to be written in the iterative. It recounts not what happened, but what used to happen. In *Passing*, the description of Clare’s visits is told in the iterative. After the Negro ball, Clare Kendry comes to the Redfield’s house frequently. From the text, the reader can gauge the determination, or the diachronic limits of the iterative series: From the Negro Welfare League Ball at the end of October until Clare’s death just after Christmas. Clare’s visits are ‘undecided and uncertain’ (123) as they depend on the presence or absence of her husband in the city. Which begs the question, how many visits and outings could there possibly be in the space of two and a half months? I see this as yet another example of the impact of Clare’s visits on Irene. To Irene, there seems to have been multiple visits by Clare, probably because the visits and Clare’s presence make such lasting impressions on her.

A central scene in the story is Irene’s tea party. Just before the party, Irene has become convinced that Brian and Clare are having an affair. She is besides herself, as evidenced by her promising herself for three different dinners on the same day and the same time. Irene has lost control of her schedule and time. Larsen uses the iterative as a narrative technique to convey the significance of the party. The narration of the tea-party scene is an example of what Genette calls to put the singulative at the service of the iterative. From the outside, the

party is like ‘so many other tea-parties she had had’ (140). There is the familiar tinkling sounds of spoons, soft sounds of inconsequential talk and the grouping and regrouping of guests. As there have been so many times before, and will be again. Yet, the party is ‘so unlike any of these others’ (140). This party is the exception to the rule. Irene looks ‘like the second gravedigger’ (141). She is unable to present her usual image as perfect hostess image. This singular telling of a specific event in an iterative series underscores the importance of this particular tea-party.

Female futures

As young girls growing up in Chicago at the start of the twentieth century, the futures available to both Clare and Irene are restricted by race and gender, but Clare faces the additional challenge of class. Though both are light-skinned, and will pass as white as adults, the ‘one-drop-rule’ defines them as Negroes. Irene is the daughter of parents who are comfortably off, while Clare’s father is a drunk and violent man who works as a janitor. Irene has things, Clare does not. Clare is never ‘one of the group’ (23). Irene, coming from a respectable family, can expect to make a safe and suitable marriage. The chrononormative demands of her future are clear: For black women of her class, marriage and motherhood is the only future in the cards. There is no expectation that Irene will support herself; it will be her future husband’s task to provide for the family.

Although the chrononormative process would include a husband and children for Clare, too, future bourgeois respectability was not a given for women of her colour and background. Working class women were more often obliged to work outside the home to make ends meet. From an early age, Clare earns her way, running errands for the dressmaker who lives on the top floor of her building. When Clare is fifteen, her father dies, and Clare is taken in by her two great-aunts. Here, she is expected to earn her keep by ‘doing all of the housework and most of the washing’ (32). It was, Clare says, a ‘hard life for a girl of sixteen’ (33). When she goes back to visit Irene and her other friends on the South side, she ‘almost’ hates all of them. ‘You had all the things I wanted and never had had’ (34), she explains to Irene. Clare’s opportunities to determine her future differ from the other female characters discussed in this thesis. More than any of the others’, Clare’s future is curtailed by financial constraints.

The emergence of a modern urban culture is important for the female characters' possibilities for self-determination. First, social and geographical mobility is a requirement to pass. It is Clare Kendry's move from Chicago's south side to another part of town that enables her to invent a new, white identity. Moreover, in the first decades of the twentieth century, the city emerged as a site of ethnic and social diversity. It was also a space newly opened to 'the feminine', as Mae Henderson notes (xviii). A woman could walk the streets of the city on her own without risking her reputation. In the 1920's, women had started to move from the domestic sphere to the public. Thus, Irene Redfield can have tea in a hotel by herself, pursue her shopping by foot and wander the streets of Harlem alone without anyone questioning her respectability.

Importantly, because of her light skin, Irene can pass both the colour line and the gender line. She can go where her dark-skinned husband cannot. She can enter spaces and worlds where her Black husband is not permitted entry. But there are strict social limits to Irene's freedom of movement. During the novel, Irene spends most of her time indoors, in a house that Charles Scruggs describes as 'an image of bourgeois aggressiveness and acquisitiveness' (160). Women of Irene's and Clare's class and status are not expected to work or pursue individual interests. In their present and in their futures, society permits Irene and Clare to shop, drink tea and plan and attend parties. Irene accepts the limitations on her future in return for security in the present. Clare does not.

Passing can be seen as the ultimate self-reinvention. The passer extinguishes his or her previous life, severs personal and social bonds and starts a new life. Clare has reinvented herself. She has passed from black to white, from poverty to wealth, from black working class to white upper middle class. She has escaped the traditional life trajectory for women of her race and class. The janitor's daughter has surpassed Irene in wealth and glamour, but her ascent has come at a very high price. In her article 'What feminism?', Alice Jardine references the ideas of philosophers Teresa Brennan and Julia Kristeva to argue that in order to become subjects and act upon the world, men (and increasingly women) have resorted to unloading and projecting all negative affects and aggressions upon some 'other'. The 'other' is the idea of Womanhood (71). Throughout history, women have largely been forced to accept passively the negative projection in exchange for recognition (Mrs Somebody) and security (protection). In return for recognition and security, Clare Kendry must accept not only her husband's negative projections of Womanhood, but also of his projections of blackness.

Clare's husband, Jack Bellew, has 'untold gold' (34) and can provide economic security for Clare. But he is also an avowed racist and knows nothing about Clare's origin.

The phrase 'everything must be paid for' is repeated twice in the novel, first uttered by Clare's father, later reiterated by Irene. The price Clare must pay for her new, affluent, white life is to endure her husband's racism – he calls her 'Nig' because she gets so dark in the sun – and sever all ties to her former life. At their first meeting in Chicago, Clare says she thinks her affluence is 'worth the price' of completely erasing her past (36). However, as the narrative progresses, Clare becomes unwilling to bear the cost. In her 'pale life' she sees the 'bright pictures of that other that I once thought I was glad to be free of' (7). She wants to reclaim her past and determine an alternative future, even at great risk.

In Irene's view, Clare has disowned her race, and her past, and married for money. Irene sees Clare as a cold, selfish opportunist. However, what other paths to the future were available to Clare? She lived with her aunts at their mercy, and performed hard labour. No wonder Clare was 'determined to get away' (34). And contrary to what Irene believes, Clare does not marry only for money. She desires to be 'a person and not a charity or a problem' (34). For Clare, passing for white and marriage are means to personhood. Passing and marriage were the paths available to her to forge a new future for herself.

The uncomfortable fact, which Irene refuses to acknowledge, is that there are similarities in kind between Irene's marriage and Clare's. At the end of the novel, Irene admits to herself that 'she couldn't now be sure that she had ever truly known love. Not even for Brian. He was her husband and the father of her sons. But was he anything more? (...) In that hour she thought not.' (170) Irene has not married for love. She has married for recognition – she is Mrs. Brian Redfield – and security, as have so many women throughout history. Cheryl Wall highlights how each of the female characters in *Passing* depend on a husband for material possessions, security and identity. As Wall convincingly argues: 'Clare's is merely an extreme version of a situation all share' (107). *Passing* portrays the impossibility of self-definition for black women in the 1920s, and their dependence on men.

In Elizabeth Freeman's view, marriage is a means to an end, a sign of proper adult progress. For women of the 1920s, marriage was an inescapable part of chrononormativity. David Blackmore highlights that in *Passing*, Nella Larsen portrays 1920's middle-class marriages as oriented towards gaining social advantage. There are no intimations of intimacy of any kind between the couples. Brian looks at Irene as if she is 'no more to him than a pane

of glass' (134), while Jack Bellew knows nothing about his wife's childhood and upbringing. Irene and Clare reflect and are reflections of their husband's class status, therefore appearances are all-important. Much of Irene's time is taken up by planning what to wear, getting dressed and putting on make-up. She is a doctor's wife and her appearance should and does reflect that; she is sensible, proper and respectable. Much of Clare's life depends on keeping up appearances – as white. She, too, dresses the part: As a beautiful, glamorous white woman.

Motherhood, the perennially accepted temporal destiny of women, is of particular importance to Julia Kristeva. Kristeva traces the repetitive structure of women's time back to the time of the reproductive body. Pregnancy, argues Kristeva, opens new possibilities for women as the mother can experience a splitting of the subject and total love for an Other. Both Clare and Irene are mothers, but they do not live up to traditional maternal ideals. For Clare, pregnancy was a terrifying, not creative time: 'I nearly died of terror the whole nine months (...) for fear that she might be dark' (49). A dark baby would end her life as she knew it, not renew it. A black baby would reveal Clare's race to her husband. For Clare, pregnancy was a time of dread, not joy, and she is determined never to have another child.

I find that Judith Halberstam's *In a Queer Time and Place* can offer some interesting perspectives on the portrayal of both motherhood and time in Larsen's novel. Halberstam argues that queerness has the potential to open up new life narratives. To Halberstam, queer time is 'about the potentiality of a life unscripted by the conventions of family, inheritance, and child rearing' (4). In this context, it is worth reiterating the subtext of lesbian sexuality in *Passing*. The latent lesbian desire hints at potentially different temporal pathways for women. As David Blackmore notes, there was a visible black lesbian subculture established in Harlem at the time of *Passing*'s publication. According to Judith Halberstam, queer subcultures produce 'alternative temporalities by allowing their participants to believe that their futures can be imagined according to logics that lie outside of those paradigmatic markers of life experience – namely, birth, marriage, reproduction and death' (4). The text of *Passing* is ambiguous as to whether Clare is sexually attracted to Irene. What is clear, however, is that Clare is able to imagine a future beyond the chrononormative life stages of marriage and motherhood. Clare admits that motherhood is not the be-all and end-all of her existence: 'Children aren't everything', she says, adding that 'there are other things in the world' (124). Clare, as the object of Irene's queer desire, represents an alternative temporal script for women.

Irene is horrified by Clare's denunciation of motherhood as her final destiny. Irene is firmly invested in the cult of motherhood. She admits she takes being a mother 'rather seriously' (124), but I would argue it is the status and position as mother she takes seriously, not an emotional involvement with her children. Irene frets about them, but in the course of the story, she spends very little time with them. There is little textual evidence to suggest that Irene relates to her children in a deep and meaningful way. Also, just as Clare leaves her daughter Margery, who is ten, in a Swiss school for many months, Irene considers sending her son, Junior, who is also ten, to Europe for a year. In this, as in so many other ways, Irene conforms to the reigning bourgeois norms.

Several critics, Sullivan, Tate and Harrison-Kahan among them, have pointed to how Clare serves as Irene's double. Clare is the id to Irene's ego. In Freud's model of the mind, the id is what is there at birth. It wants immediate gratification, and pays no heed to risk or danger. The id operates according to the pleasure principle, and its aim is to avoid pain and pursue pleasure. Anthony Storr highlights how the id ignores categories of time and space and treats contraries as they were identical (47). Clare has 'a having way', and by her own admission she would 'do anything, hurt anybody, throw anything away' (125) to get the things she wants. She wants immediate gratification, never mind the risk. Clare wants things now, in the present, without temporal delay. Moreover, she does not acknowledge the difference between black and white. She insists she can be both. Clare is id and she is *excess*. The text underscores the excessive nature of Clare by the repeated use of the qualifier 'too'. Her smile is 'too provocative' (14), and there is a quality around her 'too vague to define, too remote to seize' (19). The wording of Clare's letter is 'too lavish' and 'too unreserved' (75), and she is numerous times described as just 'too good-looking' (27). In short, Clare is too much for Irene to handle.

Irene insists that she and Clare are 'strangers in their ways and means of living. Strangers in their desires and ambitions. Strangers even in their racial consciousness' (93). Where Clare is id, Irene embodies the ego. Irene is concerned with self-preservation at all cost and avoids risk and danger. The ego operates according to the reality principle which inhibits the impatient urge for instant gratification. It employs reason, common sense and the power to delay immediate responses to external stimuli. Irene wants no part of danger. What she wants above everything else is 'to keep undisturbed the pleasant routine of her life' (159). She enjoys the 'easy monotony' (89) of her life. Irene craves stability, regularity and above all to keep things as they are. In effect, what Irene wants is stasis and timelessness. To obtain

security, Irene is well aware that she has sacrificed ‘happiness, love or some wild extasy that she had never known’ (169). She has sacrificed her own depths of feeling, sexuality and personal ambition, but she has also sacrificed the happiness of her husband. Irene will not countenance Brian’s desire to move to Brazil. She threatens to divorce him if he goes. It turns out that Irene, like Clare, is willing to ‘do anything’ to get what she wants.

As Peter Gay stresses, to Freud, all mental life is more or less continual warfare between the ego and the id (337). When Irene meets Clare, Irene’s ego is not capable of controlling her desire. Irene’s ego and id go to war, so to speak, and the two drives jar against each other and compete for control. Irene is determined to keep her life in order, so she initially refuses to read Clare’s letters, take her calls or accept her invitations. However, Irene’s pledges to avoid Clare repeatedly fail. She reads the letters, takes the calls and invites Clare to teas and parties. Irene’s ego imposes rules, the id disobeys. The ego thinks of future self-preservation, the id wants the immediate gratification of seeing Clare. Irene’s ego wants to avoid the risk of experimenting with alternative queer temporalities, her id doesn’t care.

The narrative structure mirrors Irene’s internal struggle. The tight structure of the novel masks the choppy and repetitive narrative. Numerous times, Irene decides to do something, only to immediately change her mind. On a Tuesday morning in Chicago, Irene decides to do ‘nothing about seeing Clare Kendry that afternoon’ (42). Yet, the very next sentence reads: ‘But she did see her’. When she receives Clare’s letter after her visit to Clare’s hotel, Irene tells herself that she will not read it. Five lines further down: ‘But she did read it’ (67). The first chapter of the ‘Finale’, where Irene has become certain that Brian and Clare are having an affair, ends with the sentence: ‘But it didn’t matter’ (147). The next chapter opens with: ‘But it did matter’ (148). Irene thinks she will never be able to sleep, ‘but she did sleep – several hours’ (132). Irene is certain that the Negro Welfare League ball has been undistinctive (120), but the dance is immediately revealed to be ‘important’ (120). This back-and-forth and the repetitive, simple syntax reflects Irene’s inner turmoil.

A narrative of repression

In *Chronoschisms*, Ursula Heise points to how modernist writers were particularly interested in exploring a private, inner temporality, and that they employed the narrative techniques of memory and recall to do so. *Passing* exemplifies the modernist concern with memory in story

and narrative form. Almost the entire first part of *Passing* consists of Irene's memories, and throughout the novel, key scenes are recounted as Irene's recollections.

Narrative anachronies is Genette's term for the various types of discordances between the ordering of events in the story and in the narrative. Genette classifies anachronies into backward-looking (analepses) and forward-looking (prolepses). Both Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, in his *Narrative Fiction*, and Genette note that retrospective analepses are much more common in literature than forward-looking prolepses. The contrast between the use of anachronies in Larsen's *Passing* (published 1929) and Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (published 2010) is striking. In the latter novel, there is an almost exaggerated use of prolepses, reflecting a more future-oriented sense of time, which I will discuss in more detail in chapter three. In *Passing*, analepses dominate the narrative. It is a fitting narrative technique to tell a story where repression of the past, of memories and of desire is such a central theme.

To begin a story is unavoidably difficult, stresses Gérard Genette. He sees the long narrative tradition of complexly structured openings as mimicking the perennial problem of knowing where to start. *Passing* is a part of this tradition, too. The multiplication of beginnings of the story mirrors the multiplication of Irene Redfield's memories. The narrative opens with Irene going through her morning mail. 'A thin sly thing' (3) of a letter triggers a memory of a similar letter received some two years ago. The first analepses, told as recall, takes the narrative back in time to Clare Kendry as 'a pale small girl sitting on a ragged blue sofa' (4). The *reach* of this analepsis is some two decades, while its extent, its duration, is from when Clare is a small girl to the day her father dies, when Clare is fifteen. This is an external analepsis, and its function is to give more information and background to the first narrative. After Irene's memory has taken her back in time to her childhood, she brings 'her thoughts back to the present' and proceeds to read the letter that she still holds in her hand (7). A parallel is thus established between the reader and Irene; Irene reads the letter, the reader reads the story of Irene reading the letter.

However, Irene does not stay long in the narrative's present. The letter once more takes her back, and this time to 'that time in Chicago' (8), two years earlier. This second analepsis brings us, finally, to the start of the first narrative, which is the story of when Irene and Clare meet again as adults. The second analepsis is introduced by the sentence: 'This is what Irene Redfield remembered' (9) and concluded, three chapters later, with 'such were Irene Redfield's memories' (74). The repeated mention of Irene's memories provides

structure to the text. When the second part of the novel begins, Irene is still sitting in her room, holding Clare's letter. She has not moved. There is little mention of what has happened in the intervening two years, from the meeting in Chicago to the receipt of Clare's letter. This is an example of the many ellipses in the text, where things are left unsaid, unexplained and ambiguous.

Passing is a narrative of repression. The question of what can and cannot be spoken, what can and cannot be publicly exposed is raised throughout the text. It links with the larger question of public exposure of both colour and desire (Butler, *Bodies* 169). There are many things Irene refuses to talk about. She worries that her son, Junior, is picking up 'queer ideas' about sex. Sex is a non-topic. So, too, is race. To Irene it is 'inexcusable' (162) to bring up the subject of lynchings at dinner. She wants her children's childhood to be happy and free of the knowledge of the race problem. Moreover, key elements of the narrative are shrouded in ambiguity. Central events remain unclear, unvoiced – and repressed. Irene convinces herself that Brian and Clare are having an affair, but there is no evidence in the text to prove or disprove this. The ending, too, is ambiguous. Is it a suicide, accident or homicide? The text gives no definite answers.

Larsen uses repetition to convey the return of the repressed. Try as she might to uphold the smooth routine of her days and household, repressed desires surface and disturb Irene's tranquillity. A recurrent theme is Brian's 'unreasonable restless feeling', which is eventually revealed to be his thwarted desire to move to Brazil. There is what Genette would label an advance mention of this when Irene, having tea at the Drayton, reflects that her son, Ted, is just like his father. Ted, like Brian, is 'for ever wanting something that he couldn't have' (12). This is a 'simple marker' that will acquire its significance only later. Genette notes that simple markers belong to the 'classic art of preparation' (76).

The explicit link between South America and Brian's restlessness is made when Irene returns from Chicago and worries that Brian has been lonely so that 'that old, queer, unhappy restlessness had begun again with him, that craving for some place strange and different' (69). Brian's unhappiness is repeated throughout the novel. Irene insists that his discontent will eventually die, 'flicker out' (85). It is as if Irene believes that wants and desire follow a linear schedule to an end-point. In *Time Binds*, Elizabeth Freeman argues that affective modes can be seen to exist outside linear time. Brian's restlessness, his unhappiness, is such an affective mode, and exists 'within him' (84), static and constant. It does not pass.

Larsen uses the technique of recall to narrate the Negro Welfare Ball, which will prove to be a turning point in the narrative. This is another example of how key scenes in story are narrated as recollections. At the start of the chapter, in short order, there are six paragraphs that start with the phrase ‘She remembered...’ Significantly, we are not told at what point in the story Irene is remembering the ball. By merging repetition and recall in the repeated use of the phrase ‘she remembered’, the memories become a kind of mantra or meditation. A mantra is by definition constantly repeated, time and time again. Irene, this narrative technique implies, has returned, obsessively to the memories of the ball many times. Irene’s memories of Clare are still with her.

In an external prolepsis, that is a prolepsis that goes beyond the temporal field of the first narrative, the narrator of *Passing* attests to the future significance of the Negro Welfare Ball: ‘For it marked the beginning of a new factor in Irene Redfield’s life, something that left its trace on all the future years of her existence. It was the beginning of a new friendship with Clare Kendry’ (120). The meaning of this prolepsis is highly ambiguous. At first reading, the reader is led to believe that it is the friendship that will leave its trace on Irene’s future existence. However, on rereading, this seems deliberately misleading. For Irene, the friendship quickly transforms into rivalry and jealousy, and, of course, the friendship is short-lived. What will leave its trace on Irene’s life is more likely the repressed emotions she feels for Clare or her guilt concerning Clare’s death.

I would like to highlight the use of anachronies in very last scene of the novel, concentrating especially on the significance of the ellipses. As Thomas Elsaesser notes, in elliptical narratives, there is more to tell than can be said, and this is particularly true about the circumstances of Clare’s death. First, as John Bellew stands ‘*speechless* now in his hurt and anger’ (176) (my italics) in the Freeland’s living room, there is a prolepsis: ‘What happened next, Irene Redfield never afterwards allowed herself to remember. Never clearly’ (176). The prolepsis serves both as a testimony to the intensity of the present experience and an advance notice with a very short reach: The narrator precedes immediately to tell (parts) of what happened. Judith Butler argues that throughout the novel, the close third person narrator steps in to say what Irene cannot. But in the final scene, Irene is incapable of speech, and the narrator remains silent. The inability of speech is symbolised by the use of the long dash. ‘What would others think? That Clare had fallen? That she had deliberately leaned backward? Certainly one or the other. Not – ‘ (177). The long dash signifies the ellipses. Later, Irene stammers: ‘Is she – is she – ‘ (180).

In *Trauma and Recovery*, Judith Herman writes of how trauma breaks down time and place, self and subjectivity (69). Trauma, according to Herman, is pre-narrative, beyond and outside language. As Herman writes, trauma is an event that has ‘no beginning, no ending, no before, no during and no after’ (69). She sees human consciousness as a barrier that protects the organism by placing stimulation within an ordered experience of time. What causes trauma is a shock that appears to work very much like a bodily threat but is in fact a ‘break in the mind’s experience of time’ (63). Just as Irene attempts to say ‘I–’ (181), her quaking knees give way and everything is dark. At the moment of trauma, Irene’s self disappears. There is a definite break in her experience of time. ‘Centuries after’, she hears a man say ‘death by misadventure, I’m inclined to believe.’ (182) The normal duration of linear time no longer applies.

The narrative of *Passing*, like Irene’s life, is a tight, closed-circuit system where words, phrases and events move in circles. The novel is structured as a three-part play, each consisting of four scenes, with the three parts dialectically named ‘Encounter’, ‘Re-Encounter’ and ‘Finale’. Repetition and parallels appear throughout the text: At the beginning of the novel, a man topples and falls to the ground. At the end, a woman falls from a window. At the start, Irene takes an elevator moving from the heat of the Chicago street to the cool of the Drayton rooftop. At the end, Irene, Brian and Clare climb the stairs from the cold New York street to the warmth of the Freeland’s apartment. Clare and Irene meet on a scorching hot day, their relationship ends on a cold night. The two women restart their friendship in front of a ‘long window’ (12) at the Drayton, the relationship ends by way of a ‘long casement-window’ (174) at the Freeland’s. A final example of circularity is how the narrative moves through the seasons: The women meet in summer, are reunited in autumn (two years later) and Clare dies in winter. Irene might buy into the chrononormative idea of time as linear and progressive, but the narrative structure of *Passing* suggests the existence of other temporalities, characterised by cycles and repetition.

I agree with Claudia Tate who argues that the ‘obvious artificiality’ of the novel is ‘an intentional stylistic device’ (142). The structure of the novel is self-consciously literary. The form of the novel emphasises the artificiality of the characters’ lives and the theme of passing as role-play and as a theatrical act. Through story and narrative structure, Nella Larsen critiques the chrononormative expectations of women in the 1920s and the limits placed on their opportunities for self-determination.

Chapter 2:

Joan Didion's *Play It As It Lays*: Time Denied

'I might as well lay it on the line, I have trouble with *as it was*' proclaims Maria Wyeth, the main character in Joan Didion's *Play It As It Lays* (7, italics in original). At the start of the novel, Maria is in a mental hospital, desperately trying to keep her 'mind in the now' (8). According to Maria, thinking of how things used to be 'leads to nowhere' (7). The past is useless, the present is all that matters. Or so Maria would have us believe. But she is not to be trusted. A life of the present, cut off from the past and future, comes at a very high price, as Maria knows all too well. *Play It As It Lays* is a story about what women must repress and sacrifice to live in the present only. It is a story about the female experience of living in a world where women are not allowed to speak of the past or the future. In my analysis, *Play It* is a story about the denial of alternative temporalities for women.

Didion's novel is a temporal contradiction. It is a novel all about the present which insists upon the importance of remembering the past. It is a novel of fragmented frenzy that mourns order and stability. It takes no time to read, yet demands to be read slowly. Read it too quickly, and you risk losing the point, much like Maria. In this novel, the devil is not in the details, but in the blanks. What's important in the 87 brief, choppy chapters is what is left out, forced out by the demands of speed, of progress, of the necessity to move on in the here and now. More than anything, I will argue, it is the desire and experiences of women which are blanked out in the narrative just as they are forcibly excluded from the dominant temporal template. The blanks represent Maria's trauma and grief and her thwarted maternal love.

I identify two poles of temporal dynamic in the novel, both of which are reflected in the novel's form. On the one hand, there is a strong emphasis on a reduction of time to the present. Fredric Jameson identifies this 'shrinkage of existential time' as a characteristic of postmodernity. He points to the fragmented nature of postmodernist literature (and film), where plot is reduced 'to the merest pretext or thread to string a series' of unconnected scenes (714). In terms of formal structure, *Play It* fits into the postmodernist fold. The novel has a fragmented narrative and very loosely connected chapters and scenes. Not all agree that fragmentation is a distinguishing feature our time. The feminist critic Rita Felski, for instance, disagrees with Jameson's view of temporality in postmodernity. I think both Jameson and

Felski offer useful insights to discuss the treatment of time in *Play It*. I will return to their ideas later in this chapter.

On the other hand, there exists an alternative temporal dynamic to the push to the present in Didion's novel. In my view, there is an equally strong sense of backwardness, of wanting to return to a previous time or state. I think Elizabeth Freeman's evocative phrase, a 'stubborn lingering of pastness', beautifully captures the backwards regard of the novel (8). I will argue that *Play It* is a narrative of regression, and that Maria Wyeth can be seen as the epitome of the death drive. After her abortion, she falls apart. She is no longer capable of living in the present only, she wants to regress, to become inanimate. In effect, what she aims for is not so much death as *atemporality*, or a state of being before entry into time. Her regression is mirrored in the narrative structure. The narrative becomes increasingly fragmented and disconnected. Temporal markers that are present in the beginning all but disappear by the end of the novel. My claim is that the narrative, mirroring Maria, regresses towards the time of pre-narrative, that is, before temporal order was imposed.

In this chapter, I will argue that *Play It As It Lays* can be read as a meditation on the price women pay when they enter what Julia Kristeva identifies as masculine, historical time. It is about the sacrifices demanded of women to enter the sociosymbolic contract. To adhere to the masculine, linear temporal script, women must repress or deny alternative visions of time. In 'Women's Time', Kristeva argues that mythical and cyclical temporalities are connected to the distinctive psychic and physical experiences of women. There is no time for the mythical or cyclical in the push to the present in Didion's novel. Moreover, there is no acceptance for the mental and bodily experiences particular to women. Maria must suppress her grief over her mother's death and her daughter's hospitalisation. The medical establishment imposes schedules and timetables for when and how long Maria can see her daughter. And Maria's husband forces her to have an abortion, under threat of losing custody of their joint child. In short, the reigning, patriarchal cultural order refuses Maria the experience of motherhood and thwarts her maternal love. The dominant temporal regime portrayed in *Play It* denies the existence of mythical and cyclical temporalities that Kristeva argues constitute female subjectivity.

Critics have labelled *Play It As It Lays* as a story of 'psychic collapse' (Winchell 128), a painting of a nightmare landscape (Fracasso), an indictment of the moral corruption of mass culture (Rhodes) and an exploration of the American heritage and the decline of the American dream (Wolff). It is a description of a life which is 'atemporal in the extreme', as Sandra K.

Hinchman puts it (470). The novel is all of these things. It is a ruthless, merciless depiction of the consequences of living in the present only. However, I will argue that *Play It As It Lays* can also be read as a novel about the price women pay for living within temporal templates where there is no time for them. I read *Play It* as an indictment of the limited temporal pathways available to American women in the late 1960s. As the story of Maria Wyeth shows, the opportunities for female self-determination were severely restricted by a dominant, patriarchal temporal regime.

In this chapter, I will, first, discuss the critical reception of Didion's novel. Then, I will argue that patriarchal society denies Maria the experience of motherhood. Third, I will examine how the postmodern reduction of time to the present is apparent in the novel. Finally, I will explain why I consider *Play It* to be narrative of regression.

The Hollywood novel from a female perspective

In the course of a career spanning six decades, Joan Didion has authored journalism, essays, screenplays, memoirs and novels. You name it, Didion has written it, often to rave reviews. Although Didion has published four novels, it is her non-fiction that has attracted the most popular and critical interest. As early as 1983, the critic Cynthia Griffin Wolff found it 'troubling' that Didion's fiction was so easily dismissed. The sentiment was repeated decades later when the journal *Auto/Biography Studies* published a forum on 'Joan Didion's Genres'. Here, Karen Steigman writes that the typical move in Didion-criticism is to hail her importance while diminishing her works (597). Steigman claims that Didion's short and sparse novels are deemed minor in comparison to the big novels of her big-named – and male – contemporaries, like Don DeLillo, Norman Mailer and Thomas Pynchon. Didion's fiction is the junior partner to her non-fiction, seems to be the common consensus, and Steigman considers her status in the literary canon 'uncertain' (598).

I will make no attempts to rate Didion's fiction vis-à-vis her non-fiction or her contemporaries; that is not my endeavour here. As to Didion's security of place in the American literary canon, others will have to judge. My interest in Didion's novel is how it captures the particular experience of time for women in late 1960s American culture. I think the novel is significant because it shows, through story and narrative structure, the price women have to pay to live in a temporal regime characterised by a reduction of time to the present.

Didion has a well-deserved reputation as a literary stylist of the highest order, and *Play It As It Lays* has received much critical appreciation. Critics have consistently praised Didion's technique and use of narrative strategies to portray a morally bankrupt world where meaningful human relations are non-existent. In an early, influential reading, David Geherin sees the main concern of the novel as being Maria's encounter with absurdity and nothingness. In the words of Mark Royden Winchell, Didion's novel depicts a 'spiritual wasteland' (132). Similarly, Evelyn Fracasso, maintains that the novel shows the 'dehumanisation of the individual, the deterioration of the mind, the desolation of the landscape, and the disintegration of traditional values' (153). For her part, Cynthia Griffin Wolff cautions against 'naïve readings' of Didion's novel. Wolff sees *Play It As It Lays* as no less than an examination of American heritage and the decline of the American dream. She argues that the tensions in the novel are always between past and present – 'Maria's past and present, and the past and present of a once-great culture' (481).

Incisive and thought-provoking as these critical readings are, I agree with Janis P. Stout who claims that other critics have not paid enough attention to the particular female dimensions of Didion's work. In her 1990-study of silence and meaning in the works of Joan Didion and three other female writers, Stout writes that 'what has not been sufficiently recognised is the extent to which Didion's silences and curtailments speak out of a specifically female quality of experience and with particular reference to femaleness' (149). Stout argues forcefully that Maria is oppressed by her sexual identity and her sexuality. Much of this chapter is informed by Stout's inspiring work. In later years, Chip Rhodes is one critic who has focused specifically on gender in Didion's novel. In his writings on the Hollywood novel, Rhodes praises *Play It As It Lays* as being unique within the genre because it focuses exclusively on the effects of the culture industry on women (133). He sees the novel as an investigation into the causes and consequences of the Hollywood culture industry, and argues that it is a novel about how mass culture emotionally numbs and morally corrupts all those who come into its orbit.

Perhaps because few critics have discussed the novel as an indictment of the opportunities for women in late 1960s Hollywood, many have been quick to condemn the character of Maria Wyeth. Critics have given Maria a very hard time. They see her as narcissistic, amoral and wilfully passive. Moreover, they question the sincerity of her maternal love. In his introduction to the novel, David Thomson, for one, thinks Maria lives an 'amoral life founded on the thought that 'nothing applies'' (x). Evelyn Fracasso sees Maria's

inability to react with horror at BZ's suicide as the definite act of dehumanisation and argues that it 'signals the total abnegation of her humanity' (156). Sandra K. Hinchman joins the chorus, and offers little sympathy to Maria. In Hinchman's view, Maria wants to disclaim moral responsibility and prefers to see herself as 'powerless and therefore blameless' (460). To Chip Rhodes, Maria's fixation on Kate is single-minded, narcissistic and self-destructive (137). Cynthia Wolff, too, questions Maria's sincerity as a mother and notes how all of Maria's images of herself and Kate are tainted by 'the rosy images of advertising copy' (489).

To be sure, Maria Wyeth is a character who is hard to like. However, I would like to offer a more sympathetic reading of her by highlighting the restrictions under which she operates. I disagree that Maria *prefers* to see herself as powerless and blameless, as Hinchman claims. On the contrary, I think Maria is consumed by guilt and blames herself for failing in every important relationship of her life. In my view, Maria sees herself as powerless precisely because she *is* without any real power to determine her present or her future.

I think Joan Didion's novel can usefully be read against the analytical backdrop of Julia Kristeva's 'Women's Time'. In her essay, Kristeva examines the feminist movement in terms of women's relationship to time. She argues that in its beginnings, the women's movement 'aspired to gain a place in linear time as the time of project and history' (18). This first generation of the women's movement, as Kristeva labels them, championed equality rather than difference. Their struggle was for equal pay for equal work and for gaining power in social institutions. They accepted the rejection of attributes traditionally considered feminine and maternal as the price necessary to enter into linear, historical time. As Rita Felski explains, when women enter historical time, they 'consent to the erasure of their specific identities as sexed subjects' (16). According to Kristeva, the second generation of feminists were women who came to feminism after 1968. This generation 'almost totally refuse' linear temporality (Kristeva 19). Their aim is to give voice to female difference, and to find a language for the 'intrasubjective and corporeal experiences left mute by culture in the past' (Kristeva 19). Didion's novel is set in the late 1960s, which is at the cusp of the second generation of the women's movement. In my view, *Play It* reflects the concerns of both generations of the women's movement as identified by Kristeva. The novel illustrates the price women pay to enter linear time *and* attempts to give voice to a particular female experience.

At first glance, *Play It As It Lays* is a story about a liberated woman of the late 1960s. Maria Wyeth can work, earn her own money and live alone. She can be independent. She can

marry and divorce, she can have a baby or not. She can drink and do drugs and no one will bat an eyelid. She can have sex with whoever she wants, in whatever fashion she desires. And she does. In this sense, Maria is a product of her time. *Play It As It Lays*, with its contemporary setting, was published in 1970, after the sexual revolution of the 1960s and in the early years of the women's liberation movement. It was a time of social and cultural upheaval, of increased sexual freedoms and civil rights. California, where the novel is partly set, was one of the most progressive states both in terms of abortion rights and divorce law. Nationally, as the historian Nancy Cott chronicles, from 1965 to 1980, demographic indicators changed dramatically: The marriage rate went down, the divorce rates skyrocketed and the number of children born outside wedlock increased. Not least, there was a 'banalisation' of previously condemned behaviour, argues Cott (202). Or, as Maria Wyeth would say, it was a spirit of 'everything goes' (8).

However, if what we get from sexual and female liberation are the lives of Maria and her crowd, freedom loses much of its lustre. Didion insists that in a society where everything goes, something of great value is lost along the way. Intimate human relations cannot thrive in unchecked freedom, ethics require restraint. In this vein, Cynthia Griffin Wolff reads the novel as a meditation on the balance between 'freedom' and 'constraint' in American society. 'Founded through an act of violent, filial rebellion, the United States has been in something of a quandary when it came to delimiting the exact nature of our freedom and the precise constrictions of our duty,' writes Wolff (492). She argues that the lifting of crippling restrictions and the introduction of choice and flexibility has not been accompanied by the necessary redefinition of moral categories. Rather, moral categories are treated as irrelevant. The result, as shown in Didion's novel, is not the hoped-for liberated, tolerant, ethical and just society, but a nightmare world of amorality and evil. My contention is that this amoral world is particularly hard on women.

In my view, *Play It As It Lays* highlights the limitations facing women in the late 1960's. Within the dominant, masculine temporal template, women's opportunities for future self-determination are restricted. Yes, Maria and the other female characters are sexually liberated and have more freedom than previous generations to determine their futures, but they still operate in an environment where men call all the shots. The positions of power are all inhabited by men. Women are allowed, indeed expected, to have sexual desires, but men still tell them what to do, where to go and what to feel. At one point in the novel, it occurs to Maria that 'whatever arrangements were made, they worked less well for women' (46). I

think the novel could also be read as an indictment of the sexual revolution. The sexual free-for-all give men a steady supply of women, without requiring them to relinquish power. The result is free love for all, but all power to the patriarchy.

Play It describes a world with limited temporal scripts available to women. Consider the female roles and pathways to the future visible to Maria as she surveys her Hollywood landscape. There is the woman suffering a mental breakdown, with ‘sardine cans in the sink’ and ‘vermouth bottles in the wastebaskets’ (16). There are the ‘idle lonely’, who read the horoscope waiting in the checkout line on Saturday evenings (122). There is the gambler and the call-girl. And there is the socialite and the silly starlet. Maria rejects all of these parts as potential narratives of her life. She shops ‘for a household’ (122) so that she will not be mistaken for a lonely, single woman. She vows that she will never ‘walk through the Sands or Caesar’s alone after midnight’ (136) to avoid being taken for a prostitute. And she will never do as the socialites or starlets and ‘carry a Yorkshire in Beverly Hills’ (136).

There are, of course, potentially other roles for women in Hollywood. For some, successful, sexy actress could be an option. Unfortunately, at 31, Maria is no longer young, her sex appeal has diminished and her two-film CV is far too short to be labelled a success. There is also one single mention in the novel of a woman who is politically active and appears to have found professional contentment independent of her husband: Ruth Loomis. She is ‘very active in the civil rights movement and group therapy’ (52). However, Maria is so intimidated by Ruth that she is unable to speak to her, and Ruth makes only a very brief appearance. Didion leaves no doubt that a future as a civil rights activist patently is not in the cards for her main character. Maria’s options are limited, and she rejects the pathways to the future available to her. However, Maria is unable to define a positive and secure identity for herself and map out an independent life narrative.

Motherhood denied

What Maria wants most of all, in both the present and the future, is to be a mother. In the desire for maternity, Maria would seem eminently and productively chrononormative. There is traditionally no other temporal destiny for women more accepted than motherhood. However, society expects motherhood to be performed in a certain way. The dominant temporal regime has a template for maternity that Maria is unable and unwilling to meet. Her daughter Kate has ‘an aberrant chemical in her brain’ (5), and is institutionalised. The medical

establishment imposes a strict schedule for when and how long Maria can be a mother to her daughter. Moreover, Maria becomes pregnant with a man who is not her husband. That is an unacceptable pregnancy in the eyes of her husband and society. Maria's desire to mother a child out of wedlock does not conform to cultural standards, and her desire for motherhood is thwarted in the most dramatic way. Under threat of losing custody of Kate, Maria is forced to have an abortion.

Julia Kristeva privileges maternity as indispensable to the 'complexity of the female experience' (30). When motherhood is denied, so is a constitutive part of female subjectivity. To Kristeva, pregnancy is 'the radical ordeal of the splitting of the subject' (31). During pregnancy, women experience separation and coexistence of the self and of an Other. It is through the distinct female experience of motherhood that women learn to love completely and unconditionally another human being:

The arrival of the child (...) leads the mother into labyrinths of an experience that, without the child, she would only rarely encounter: love for another. Not for herself, nor for an identical being, and still less for another person with whom 'I' fuse (love or sexual passion). But the slow, difficult, and delightful apprenticeship in attentiveness, gentleness, forgetting oneself. (31)

Moreover, argues Kristeva, it is during birth, pregnancy and lactation that women most intensely feel part of a cyclical, mythical, cosmic temporality. The cycle of biological reproduction exists beyond the linear and progressive time of history. Kristeva argues that throughout history, women have been forced to suppress and deny experiences that are distinctively female to conform to reigning temporal norms imposed by a patriarchal order. In *Play It*, Maria is denied the distinctive female experience of motherhood. She is expected to conform to accepted norms for motherhood and to live solely within the linear time of history. The patriarchal society in which Maria lives does not accept the existence of alternative temporal modes that may offer more productive and rich lives to women.

Maria's love for Kate is real, authentic, from the depth of her being. Kate is what keeps her alive: 'Why bother, you might ask. I bother for Kate. What I play for here is Kate' (4). Maria's maternal love is total and unconditional. At this point, I would like to highlight what I consider a meaningful parallel between Maria in *Play It* and Sasha, one of the main female characters in Jennifer Egan's novel *A Visit From The Goon Squad*, which will be discussed in chapter three. Both Maria's daughter, Kate, and Sasha's son, Lincoln, have an autism spectrum disorder. One of the characteristics of autism is that it affects the person's ability to communicate and relate to others. I think it is significant that Didion and Egan both

chose to figure an autistic child to underscore the depth of Maria's and Sasha's maternal love. The two women care for their children without expecting or receiving reciprocity. This challenges the chrononormative view of time as productive, discussed by Elizabeth Freeman in *Time Binds*. The time spent caring for Kate or Lincoln is unproductive in the sense that it does not yield results. When Maria leaves her daughter, it is only Maria who cries. Kate does not show any emotion. But it does not matter to Maria, because her maternal love does not depend on Kate demonstrating that she loves her mother in return. Maria's love for Kate is constant, eternal and unconditional.

Maria does not conform to chrononormative standards of motherhood. Kate is institutionalised, and the medical institution imposes strict rules and regulations for when Maria can see her daughter. Elizabeth Freeman explains chrononormativity as a mode of temporal implementation, 'a technique by which institutional forces come to seem like somatic facts' (3). Freeman sees schedules and calendars as forms of temporal experience that seem natural to those whom they privilege. To Kate's doctors, it is a 'somatic fact' that Maria's time with Kate must be restricted. It is 'natural' that there is a strict timetable for when a mother can see her child. The doctors insist that 'unscheduled parental appearances tend to disturb the child's adjustments' (Didion 42).

In her relation to her daughter, Maria must conform to timetables and schedules, the tools of temporal regulation. According to the medical establishment, Maria visits her daughter too often. She is out of synch with the officially sanctioned frequency of mother-daughter contacts. Furthermore, Maria rejects the medical men's view of Kate as a case to be solved. In the hospital, they 'put electrodes on (Kate's) head and needles in her spine and try to figure what went wrong' (4). Kate has autism, a developmental disorder. But Maria refuses to accept that Kate is 'wrong' just because she does not follow the normal trajectories of child development. To Maria, 'Kate is Kate' (5). Her daughter is a singular, unique being, not a medical mystery to be worked out according to strict schedules.

Motherhood is denied to Maria both by the medical establishment and her husband, Carter. It is Carter who has decided to put Kate in a mental institution. And it is Carter who forces Maria to have an abortion when she becomes pregnant with another man's child. Society bestows upon Carter the power to pose the ultimatum: Either Maria has an abortion or she will lose custody of Kate. What Maria wants, does not matter. Carter, representing patriarchal society, restricts Maria's choices and her opportunities for self-determination.

In large measure because Carter has denied her motherhood, Maria finds it impossible to fulfil that other traditional female temporal destiny, the loving wife. Carter, too, fails the part of devoted husband. He is a serial adulterer and he is both physically and verbally abusive towards Maria. Nevertheless, Maria does try to grin and bear it, as she is expected to. Even after their divorce, Maria buys the paper and studies them ‘dutifully’ for small mentions of Carter (138). But if her plan is to fake it till she makes it, she fails. She has no interest in Carter’s work, and shares no enthusiasm for his success. In fact, she feels ‘anaesthetised’ by him (42). At any rate, both the caring mother and the loving wife seem to have gone out of fashion in Hollywood.

Although she is unable to live up to the part of supportive wife, Maria’s identity is defined by her position as Carter’s wife. Being *Mrs. Carter Lang* provides security and recognition. It is worth noting that one beginning of Maria’s psychic collapse occurs in the first month after she and Carter leave each other. (The term ‘one beginning’ is deliberate. Maria has struggled psychologically before – after the death of her mother, after Kate’s hospitalisation. It is hard to determine where one mental illness ends and another begins.) Maria’s mental decline begins before she has the abortion because the spectre of separation and divorce threaten Maria’s fragile sense of identity. Who is she if not a wife? What else will give her security and recognition? What temporal pathways to the future are available to her? Maria has no ready answer.

On paper, Maria is an independent woman free to define her own life narrative. In reality, she is dependent on her husband. Carter has directed the only two movies Maria has starred in. When Maria is arrested for car theft and possession, it is their agent Freddy Chaikin who gets her out of trouble, not because he cares for Maria, but because it is his ‘day-long effort to protect Carter’ (156). Later, Freddy will call various television producers asking them to offer Maria work ‘as a personal favour to Carter’ (159), and Freddy will settle her hotel bill in Las Vegas, no doubt also in order to avoid embarrassment to Maria’s husband. Helene visits Maria in the psychiatric hospital, not for Maria, but for Carter (11). Even an actor that Maria meets in an elevator gives her a look dutifully charged with sexual appreciation, ‘meant not for Maria herself but for Carter Lang’s wife’ (23). In her divorce, Maria loses much more than just a surname, she loses an identity.

Play It depicts a world where women’s traditional roles of wife and mother have lost value, but where new temporal destinies for women are yet to be defined. In the interim, the novel represents a world where women are treated as objects. At one party, Maria stands by as

two men discuss a very young girl dancing on a terrace. One of the men has done his due diligence on the product, so to speak. He has had her 'researched', and knows that she has slept with only six other men (36). That makes her an object worth 'getting into'. This scene illuminates a double standard still existent today: Women have worth as sex symbols, but there is still a premium on relative chastity. Too many sexual partners lessen a woman's market value, a fact of which Maria is painfully aware. It is no coincidence that the girl on the terrace wears a (virginal) white dress.

Maria herself is subjected to the ultimate objectification in Carter's first picture. For this movie, he simply followed Maria around and captured her everyday life on film. In the editing process, the footage – that is, Maria's life – is cut and reassembled with the aim of maximum critical and commercial success. Maria's life becomes an object, a product for the silver screen. The film symbolises Maria's lack of control over her life. Others can pause, rewind and fast-forward her life. No wonder she cannot bear to watch it.

The reduction to the present

Play It As It Lays checks all the boxes for postmodernist literature. As identified by Rita Felski, a characteristic of postmodern literature is that it undermines any sense of coherence, linearity or collective experience of time. The postmodern literary form, according to Felski, is one of rhythm and repetition. What it offers to readers is a collection of fragments, of specific, finite moments that have no stable or systematic connection (11). A postmodern novel has little plot to speak of and fragmentation is the norm. *Play It As It Lays* fits squarely into this norm.

To striking effect, Didion employs tropes from film and cinema to foreground the disconnection and fragmentation of her narrative. In the third introductory chapter, titled 'Carter', Carter the film-maker presents 'some scenes' he has very clear in his mind about Maria. The two scenes he sketches are random and disconnected. When Maria, the actress, reflects upon her life, she, too, resorts to conventions from film: 'Freeze frame. Kate fevered, Carter sponging her back while Maria called the paediatrician. Kate's birthday, Kate laughing, Carter blowing out the candle. The images would flash at Maria like slides in a dark room. On film they might have seemed a family'(138). The narrative presents Maria's imagined life not as a coherent, meaningful whole, but as a series of episodes and independent scenes. A final example, after Maria has told Carter she is pregnant, but that she does not know who the

father is ‘it came to her that in the scenario of her life this would be what was called an obligatory scene, and she wondered with distant interest just how long the scene would play’(50). I see this as an example of what the critic Sandra Hinchmann identifies as Maria’s ‘trouble with interpreting experience’ (460). Maria does not know how to relate to or deal with what is happening in her life. She can only think of her life as a collection of scenes, seemingly without any coherence or temporal connections.

The ordering of time in Didion’s postmodernist novel contrasts sharply with how time is portrayed in Nella Larsen’s modernist classic, *Passing*. Didion’s narrative is fragmented to the point where coherence is at risk, Larsen’s narrative is a tightly structured, short circuit system, as argued in chapter one. In ‘The End of Temporality’, Fredric Jameson explains why, in his view, modernism and postmodernism have different conceptions of time. Jameson argues that modernism was a period characterised by uneven development and incomplete modernisation. Modernist writers were keenly aware of a multitude of temporalities. Many writers had been born in rural villages, where a pastoral way and rhythm of life still existed. They then moved to cities, dominated by speed, where reigned a different pace of life. During the modernist period, people moved from one temporality to another, and they were sensitised to variations in temporality. Nella Larsen’s *Passing* can serve as a case in point. As I have argued in the previous chapter, *Passing* contrasts linear, historical time with cyclical domestic time. Larsen is attuned to variations in temporality, and that is reflected in her work. Not so in *Play It As It Lays*, a quintessential postmodern novel.

According to Jameson, postmodernist writers no longer shuffle back and forth between distinct temporalities. Where in modernism there were differences and multitudes of time, in postmodernism there is a waning sense of past and future. As a result, Jameson foresees the end of temporality. In the postmodern, there is an ‘alarming shrinkage of existential time and the reduction to a present that hardly qualifies as such any longer, given the virtual effacement of that past and future that can define a present in the first place’ (708). Not all agree. Rita Felski, for one, is unconvinced that our sense of time has undergone a profound transformation. She argues that Jameson exaggerates the fragmented, chaotic nature of our present time, and points to how clock time, schedules, time tables and other forms of regulated ‘objective’ time are still very much part of our lives in the postmodern.

I think both Jameson’s and Felski’s perspectives are useful in reflecting on the treatment of time *Play It As It Lays*. In my opinion, Jameson’s observations are undoubtedly relevant. Maria and all the other characters want to live in the present, and there is indeed a

strong sense of the disappearance of past and future. And yet, clock time and schedules at times figure prominently in the novel. The novel may profess to ignore temporal connections, but temporal designations abound and it is perfectly possible to trace the plot's timeline. The story follows a short year in the life of Maria Wyeth. The narrative begins at the time of Maria's separation from her husband in autumn, mentions a disastrous Christmas party, and ends with BZ's suicide and Maria's hospitalisation in early summer. The narrative's adherence to plot and chronology is reflected in how Maria tracks time. Although she tries very hard to live in the present, forget the past and ignore the future, she is, ultimately, unsuccessful, as the following passage makes clear:

She cried because she was humiliated and she cried for her mother and she cried for Kate and she cried because something had just come through to her, there in the sun on the Western street: she had deliberately not counted the months but she must have been counting them unawares, must have been keeping a relentless count somewhere, because this was the day, the day the baby would have been born. (141)

Maria's inability to forget is an example of how she is unable to live up to the temporal norm of reduction of time to the present.

No matter whether the difference in temporalities between the modern and the postmodern is one of kind or of degree, as Jameson and Felski discuss, they agree that life in the postmodern passes at a higher speed than before. Where Clare and Irene exchange letters in *Passing*, Maria communicates by phone. Irene takes the train from Chicago to New York, Carter jets from Los Angeles to Cannes. Technological change has profoundly altered the pace and nature of life. That increased speed is reflected in Didion's novel.

Play It is an extremely quick read. While it consists of more than 80 chapters, many of the chapters cover barely a page. The potential speed of reading mirrors the speed of life depicted in the novel. Maria's world is one of perpetual movement. People are always going somewhere, but never for long. Everything is temporary. The impermanence is accentuated by the novel's settings. Most of the action takes place in rented houses, motel or hotel rooms. Didion's tempo is a challenge to the reader paralleling the temporal demands that society place on Maria. Didion taunts the reader to breeze through her lean novel just as society expects Maria to stride past her troubles. So, the reader must attempt what Maria fails to do: Put on the brakes, slow down, resist the pace. And linger. That is what I aim to do here: To take the time to examine the blanks, and discuss what is left unsaid and why.

One of the most striking aspects of Didion's novel is the expanse of white space. In my 2005 paperback edition, the novel runs to 214 pages. However, by an admittedly very rough estimate, text covers barely two thirds of those pages. The rest is empty whiteness. Critics have commented extensively on Didion's use of blanks. To Thomson, the white spaces leaves plenty of 'space to soak up the tears' of Maria's depression and despair (xi). Geherin thinks the empty space testifies to 'nothingness', and Winchell echoes this view when he writes that the abundance of white space suggests 'an image of the void' (128). Stout argues that the blank spaces before and after chapters are 'great arid spaces of depression, sameness, meaningless' (159). I concur with all of these critics, but I think the most important function of the blanks is to signify everything that Maria must repress and not speak of. The narrative repeatedly tells us that Maria says nothing. She goes for days without speaking to anyone. That silence is reflected in the novel's lay-out. The white space reflects Maria's inability or unwillingness to speak.

Above all, what remains silent and unsaid is Maria's grief. She grieves her mother, Kate's hospitalisation, her divorce and her abortion. But she has no one with which to share her grief. Even worse, her grief is not acknowledged. Carter's solution to the unplanned pregnancy is a 'quick-fix' abortion. On the day of her divorce hearing, Helene tells Maria that a divorce is no excuse to fall apart. Maria's agent, Freddy Chaikin, advises her that 'work is the best medicine for things wrong in the private-life department' (91). Experiences that are distinctive to Maria's female subjectivity are denied and silenced. It is the price Maria must pay to live in a patriarchal society.

In *Precarious Life*, a meditation on mourning and violence, Judith Butler stresses the transformative nature of grief. She writes that 'it is not as if an 'I' exists independently over here and then simply loses a 'you' over there, especially if the attachment to 'you' is part of what composes who 'I' am' (22). To be a person, to be human, is to be constituted by social connections and relationships. Lose a formative relationship, like Maria does more than once, and you lose a part of yourself. Butler stresses how grief challenges the very notion of ourselves as autonomous and in control. It takes time to establish a new, different self without the lost loved one. Maria's world allows her no time to mourn, no time to recover, no time to form a new self. Her society is impatient with her sorrow. No one will listen, so Maria stays silence.

Maria's silence can be interpreted as a form of resistance, as both Rhodes and Stout have done. Stout discusses how women throughout history have used silence as a rhetorical

strategy. In her view, women speak in and through silence out of a tradition of being silenced. Historically, women have employed unresponsiveness and exaggerated passivity as opposition and resistance to male power (20). No one can make Maria talk. To speak or not to speak is one of the few ways she can exert agency. And her resistance does register. Carter repeatedly, and desperately, asks Maria how he can help her. Maria says nothing. Her silence provokes a response. Carter fights with her 'to find out' if she's alive. He 'can't take any more of that glazed expression' (198). If Carter won't listen, Maria won't talk to him. To stay silent is one of few methods available for Maria to exert self-determination.

Society does not allow Maria time to grieve partly because it does not really accept her grief. It is a truth that is as unavoidable as it is depressing that certain human lives are more grievable than others. 'What makes for a grievable life' asks Judith Butler in *Precarious Life* (20). She reminds us that there are norms governing who is grievable. I will suggest that the people and relations Maria grieves are not covered. For example, is an aborted foetus a grievable life? Is it a life? Maria herself cannot decide: 'the baby. The tissue. The living dead thing, whatever you called it' (115). What about Kate, is she 'grievable'? Maria thinks so, but society does not. In society's view, Kate is a four year old with an aberrant chemical in her brain who is best kept in a mental institution. To put a mentally retarded daughter in a medical facility is not considered a cause for despair.

The lack of acceptance and legitimacy that Didion awards the grief of her fictional character contrasts sharply with Didion's own personal experiences. In 2005, Didion published *The Year of Magical Thinking*, a 'grief memoir' about the sudden death of her husband. A second memoir, *Blue Nights*, followed in 2011, chronicling the death of her daughter. Both were critically and commercially successful. Leigh Gilmore offers an interesting reading of Didion's two memoirs in the context of the BlackLivesMatter movement. Gilmore notes how 'white women's grief historically occupies a space of privilege in the public sphere' (611). In contrast to victims of racial violence, and the experience of her fictional character in *Play It*, Didion is not required to assert the value of her loved ones' lives and deaths or her right to grieve for them in the face of the denial of their worth (Gilman 612). Didion's dead and her grief are accorded legitimacy and attention, Maria Wyeth's are not.

A narrative of regression

I argue that there are two poles of temporal dynamic in Didion's novel. On the one hand, there is the push to the present discussed above. On the other, there is a movement backwards, a longing for an ideal past, a melancholia. In this section I will discuss how I see this sense of backwardness reflected in the novel's story and narrative structure. In particular, I will discuss the inclusion of sadomasochistic sex in the novel's plot, analyse the ordering of time in the novel as a narrative of regression and use insights from trauma theory to examine Didion's crafting of time.

Many critics have discussed the pervasiveness of evil in the novel, but few have commented explicitly on the fact that much of the evil takes form as violence against women. Sexual violence is endemic. Ivan Castello has sex with Maria against her will (181), while Carter repeatedly subjects Maria to verbal and physical abuse. Also remember that in one of her two films, Maria plays a woman who is gang-raped by members of a motorcycle crew. The threat of violence is directed against all female characters, not just Maria. A steel heiress is shot in the face by her son (46). Helene is slapped by her husband BZ, and the actress Susannah Woods is beaten in a hotel room in Las Vegas. In a world where women are no more than objects, physical and emotional violence are an unavoidable part of life.

The sense of endemic sexual violence is augmented by the repeated mentions of S/M. The critic Janis P. Stout sees the sadomasochistic sex as yet another sign of the moral bankruptcy and degeneracy surrounding Maria, and argues that 'sodomachism is brutalizing to either a man or a woman' (160). I agree that the S/M in the novel speaks to the denigration of human relations and brutalisation of individuals, and that the sadomasochism underscores the subjection of women. There is no textual evidence that reigning male-female power relations are reversed in the sadomasochistic sex acts: Men control the tools, women suffer the blows. Both Helene and Maria are devastated the morning after their shared S/M venture with Helen's husband, BZ (163). However, I think that sadomasochism is referenced not just for shock value, but also functions as a comment on changing times. I find Elizabeth Freeman's interpretation of sadomasochism in *Time Binds* of particular relevance here.

Freeman understands S/M in temporal terms, and argues that 'the body in sadomasochistic ritual becomes a means of invoking history – personal pasts, collective suffering and quotidian forms of injustice – in an idiom of pleasure' (137). In other words, through the role-play at the heart of sadomasochism, one can experience other times and histories through the body. Freeman argues that sadomasochism can be understood as a

ritualised exchange of power. She points to how the Marquis de Sade resurrected an obsolete social system in his erotic writings. Sade had belonged to the aristocracy who lost all power in the French revolution. In Sade's fiction, the disempowered aristocrat revived his status as sovereign feudal despot, at least in the bedroom. Freeman also highlights how Sade wrote his major works in an era that saw a revolutionary experiment with the Western sociotemporal order, namely the introduction of the French Republican calendar from 1793 to 1805. During this era, the measurement of time was reinvented and standardised. This new temporal order discarded the rhythm of the seven-day cycle of the Christian Sabbath in favour of ten-day weeks. Also, it standardised the length of months to thirty days and recalibrated hours, minutes and seconds to the decimal system (Freeman 138). Thus, Sade 'reinvented' sex at a time of great social upheaval and as the ordering and understanding of time itself was rearranged.

Consequently, I find it eminently fitting that sadomasochism seems to be the preferred sexual practice in *Play It As It Lays*. The sixties, after all, saw dramatic social change and was a time of upheaval. Both the women's liberation movement and the civil rights movement posed unprecedented challenges to white, male power. Moreover, technological innovation in transport and communications profoundly changed conceptions of time and space as intercontinental air travel became readily available and televisions and telephones were to be found in nearly all American homes.

Freeman encourages an understanding of S/M in temporal terms. Through pain and pleasure, sadomasochism enables the practitioners to experience other modalities of time. If we follow Freeman and understand S/M in temporal terms, then the predilection for S/M in *Play It As It Lays* can be interpreted as a longing for a recent past of unquestionable white male power. This is one example of the backwardness and melancholia lingering in Didion's novel. Many of the characters long for time lost, but men and women do not long for the same past. The male characters are portrayed as the devotees of S/M, and Didion might even have hidden a seed of hope within the repeated mentions of the 'degenerate' sexual practice. Maybe the previously all-powerful males are feeling the world shift beneath their feet. Didion doesn't give relief lightly, so I wouldn't be surprised if this is all the optimism she is willing to grant.

If Nella Larsen's *Passing* can be read as a dramatization of the conflict between the ego and the id, as discussed in chapter one, Didion's novel can be seen as an illustration of the struggle between Eros and Thanatos, between the will to live and the wish to die. In his early writings, Freud understood the human psyche as controlled by two drives: the ego and the id, operating according to the reality principle and the pleasure principle respectively. However, in his clinical practice Freud saw a number of shell-shocked soldiers who relived their painful experiences from the war repeatedly and involuntarily. The compulsion to repeat painful experiences was not limited to soldiers; Freud saw the same behaviour in other patients. As Anthony Storr makes clear, Freud was deeply troubled by the implications of trauma for his theory of the human mind. These patients engaged in all sorts of self-destructive behaviour seemingly designed to prove their inherent belief that they were despised and shameful. What the shell-shocked soldiers and the self-loathing patients had in common was that the compulsive repetition gave no pleasure. Thus, Freud reasoned, there had to be fundamental forces in the mind that did not operate according to the pleasure principle.

Eventually, this realisation led Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* to formulate an aggressive instinct, derived from the death drive. Freud defines the death drive Thanatos, as 'an urge inherent in all organic life to restore an earlier stage of things' (36). Cathy Caruth, a notable theorist of trauma who will be referenced further below, links the death drive explicitly to trauma by noting that the origin of the death drive is the traumatic and sudden 'awakening' to life, for which there was no preparation, no warning (67). The death drive is linked to aggression and destruction, but as Herbert Marcuse emphasises in *Eros and Civilization*, the death instinct is destructiveness not for its own sake, but for the relief of tension. For Marcuse, the descent towards death is an unconscious flight from pain and want (29).

Maria Wyeth epitomises the death drive. Maria longs for a dreamless sleep, that is, a relief of tension, an escape from pain and want. To obtain it, she drinks far too much and pops barbiturates. Thoughts and images of death are ever-present in Maria's mind. In Oxnard, as a nurse walks past hedges of 'dead camellias', Maria imagines the woman coming toward her with a 'hypodermic needle' (130). Later, Maria will fixate on an image of a needle dripping sodium pentathol, a drug used for lethal injections, into her arm. However, in my view, what Maria wants is not so much death as atemporality. She desires to go back to an 'earlier stage of things', a time with no past. It is worth noting that in the novel, Maria pays regular visits to a hypnotist who promises to enable regression to the instant of conception (119). The promise

to regress to before conception, before the entry into time, naturally appeals to Maria. When Maria imagines herself, Les Goodwin and Kate as a happy family in a house by the sea, the key to their happiness is that ‘none of them has histories’ (115). Maria wants to erase time.

The aim of the death drive is to ‘return to the inanimate state’, and Maria’s comatose passivity comes very close to the goal. Not eating is one way of becoming inanimate, and I see Maria’s thinness as yet another symbol of her death drive. For a whole year after her mother’s death, Maria is unable to eat. (She sees rattlesnakes in her food). There are constant references to Maria’s skeletal frame, even the doctor who performs her abortion tells her that she is too thin. The other characters in the novel are well aware of Maria’s death wish, and I think their response to her desperation explains well why Maria is so desperate in the first place. ‘Did I catch you in the middle of an overdose?’ is BZ’s greeting on the phone (34), while her husband, Carter, bluntly tells her to just get it over with and take every pill and die (32). And yet, Maria survives to tell her tale. She does not join BZ in a double suicide. She chooses life. Eros wins, because Maria has her daughter Kate to play for.

The narrative form of the novel reflects Maria’s wish to return to an earlier state of things. *Play It As It Lays* is a narrative of regression. The narrative becomes increasingly fragmented in the course of the novel. In my view, the narrative regresses and attempts to go back to a time of pre-narrative, that is, to a time before temporal order was imposed. At the start, the narrative has some temporal designations. Maria drives the freeway in October, ‘on the tenth day of October at a quarter past four’ she finds herself on the outskirts of Vegas, while the man will be in touch ‘Monday at five o’clock’ to arrange the abortion. Several of the early chapters start by indicating its order in narrative time: ‘Late that night’ (chapter 12), ‘When Carter called *the next morning*’ (chapter 13, my italics), ‘At four that afternoon’ (chapter 14), ‘The next morning’ (chapter 16). Thus, at the start of the novel, the narrative is fixed in time. In the beginning, it is possible to discern the timeline of the plot, and episodes and chapters are linked.

However, as the novel continues, the narrative becomes more and more fragmented. In the latter half of the novel, there are far fewer temporal markers, and it becomes difficult to connect the scenes and chapters. The narrative disintegrates, and at times consists of no more than loose fragments of thoughts and dialogue. The text is elliptical in the extreme. The narrative regresses to a state of minimal linkage between scenes, chapters and even between sentences. Causal and temporal connections are absent. In the end, the narrative aims for atemporality, just like Maria.

In her seminal work on trauma and narrative, *Unclaimed Experience*, Cathy Caruth defines trauma as a response to unexpected or overwhelming violent events that are not fully grasped as they occur, but return later in repeated flashbacks, nightmares and hallucinations (12). The key to her understanding is the idea of trauma as a *deferred experience*, an event that is not fully understood or experienced as it occurs. This results in a repeated, compulsive return to the event in the mind of the survivor in a futile attempt to make sense of an event that is beyond comprehension. The traumatic experience is too unexpected and too overwhelming to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself repeatedly in nightmares and repetitive actions.

Maria Wyeth's abortion is a trauma that no-one will acknowledge. It is forced upon her by her husband, who threatens to take custody of Kate. Maria has the abortion, against her will and with disastrous emotional consequences. Caruth sees trauma as a breach in the mind's experience of time, self and the world (3), and this is exactly what happens to Maria. On the drive to the abortion, Maria's perception of reality is 'significantly altered' (79). During the procedure, Maria wilfully tries to disassociate, to transfer her mind to another time and place, back to herself as a ten-year old in Silver Wells. Her dissociation fails, her body, the pain, forces her to be present in the bedroom in Encino. But Maria's reality, of pain and of sorrow, is neither reflected nor acknowledged by the people around her. The male doctor tells her that the scraping of her uterus should 'be the sound of music to you', and instructs her that an abortion is 'nothing to have any emotional difficulties about' (83). Once again, the dominant patriarchal order tells Maria what to do and how to feel. Her distinctive female experiences are unacknowledged.

In her work on *Trauma and Recovery*, the psychiatrist Judith Herman warns that one of the greatest threats against victims of trauma is to silence and deny. Maria has no one to acknowledge or bear witness to her traumatic experience. I see Maria's abortion as further evidence that *Play It As It Lays* is a novel about the specific plights of women in a male-dominated society. Maria herself feels that she has 'moved into a realm of miseries peculiar to women' (62). She is right. Although Maria's abortion is performed by the only man in Los Angeles who does clean work, it is still an illegal operation. Yes, California's abortion laws were progressive in the late 1960s, but they allowed abortion only where there was grave threat against the mother's physical or mental health, or in the cases of rape and incest. Maria's abortion is illegal, and it must be silenced and denied. No one will listen to her speak

about it, no one has the time for her trauma. But the experience will not go away. The abortion and, particularly, the inability to speak about it, accelerates Maria's psychic collapse.

The concept of repetition is at the core of trauma, and, fittingly, Didion employs the narrative tool of repetition to underscore trauma's impact. In the novel's first chapter, told in the first person, Maria is in the psychiatric hospital. She sets down the 'facts' of her life on paper, and at the close of her brief self-presentation she writes: 'Now I lie in the sun and play solitaire and listen to the sea (...) and watch a hummingbird. I try not to think of dead things and plumbing' (10). This startling and illogical link between dead things and plumbing makes no sense to the reader at this point. In Genette's terminology, it is an 'advance mention' that will acquire its significance later on.

I would like to use this allusion to plumbing to highlight Didion's sophisticated narrative technique in illustrating the temporal specifics of trauma. The initial mention of plumbing does, of course, point to what happened to the aborted foetus. However, a close reading of the abortion scene reveals only the briefest hint of anything related to plumbing. Maria recalls that after he has finished, the doctor 'went into the bathroom' (83). That's it. There is no certainty that the doctor brings the pail with the aborted tissue with him, there is no sound of flushing, nothing yet to link that early advance mention of plumbing to the abortion. Following the abortion scene, the narrative notes two explicit ellipses: First, 'a few weeks' pass before Maria starts to bleed profusely (90). Then, 'a few days later', Maria's dreams begin. And it is here, in her first nightmare, that the image of plumbing is finally directly linked to the trauma of abortion. In the dream, a shadowy syndicate opens an abortion clinic in Maria's home. Then the plumbing stops up, and Maria cannot call a plumber, for she knows what will be found in the pipes, 'what hacked pieces of human flesh' (97). I find that the delayed narrative linkage mirrors perfectly the deferral of experience that Caruth identifies as the core of trauma. Strictly speaking, the 'plumbing' in the first chapter is not an advance mention of the abortion itself, but a foreshadowing of the nightmares that will haunt Maria after the event. Thus, the first mention of plumbing is a prolepsis that attests to the future intensity of the memory of a traumatic experience that cannot be fully grasped in its present.

In her encounter with a society that refuses to acknowledge her pain and grief, Maria eventually falls apart. She cannot function in a world where women are not allowed to speak of the past or the future. Moreover, she is incapable of conforming to the standards for motherhood set by the patriarchal medical order. To live in the present only, as the reigning temporal regime demands, Maria must sacrifice not only her past and her future but also her

knowledge and experience of alternative, feminine temporalities. It is a very high price indeed.

Chapter 3:

Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad*: Time Fused

'Women are writing, and the air is heavy with expectation: What will they write that is new?' asks Julia Kristeva in 'Women's Time' (32). I offer for Kristeva's consideration Jennifer Egan's spellbinding, genre-defying, innovative *A Visit from the Goon Squad*. In my view, Egan's novel is a convincing rebuttal of Frederic Jameson's claim that postmodern originality is mere repetition, recycling and re-contextualisation of past forms. Egan fuses modernist and post-modernist traditions to create something wholly original. She also fuses linear and cyclical conceptions of time and represents time as consisting of succession and cycles simultaneously. In my view, just as the characters in *Goon Squad* start over and reinvent themselves, Egan reinvents how time can be represent in literature.

The first page of this exhilarating novel can serve as an amouse-bouche to what will be served in the 360 or so pages to come. Sasha, who the reader will subsequently learn is 35, recently jobless and 'mired' in an apartment in New York City, steals a wallet from another woman in the bathroom of a hotel bar. 'I get it,' (1) says Coz, her therapist, and suddenly it is clear that Sasha is telling this story, presenting her narrative, in a therapy session. Sasha is both the woman acting and the woman remembering and interpreting the action: 'It was easy for Sasha to recognise, looking back, that the peeing woman's blind trust had provoked her' (1). Moreover, Sasha is both in the hotel bathroom and in the therapist's office, and the narrative makes it difficult to determine when she is where. The narrative shifts from the bar to the treatment room, from the time of theft to the time of therapy, and echoes how the character Sasha fluctuates between being a woman who steals to a woman who desperately wants to be able to say : 'I'm changing I'm changing I'm changing: I've changed!' (19). Sasha is both here and there, in the past and in the present, inhabiting different times and different selves contemporaneously.

And so it will go through the next thirteen chapters: The novel shifts through time and space and between characters. People appear, disappear and reappear throughout the narrative, younger or older than last seen, as minor or major characters. Chapters are told in the first person, second person and third person. One especially noteworthy chapter is told entirely in PowerPoint slides, and I will examine this particular chapter, 'Great Rock and Roll Pauses', in some detail. Throughout the novel, there are temporal leaps backwards and

forwards, ranging across weeks, years and decades; spatial shifts between cities, countries and continents, and changes in mood and narrative voice. I will argue that the result of this exuberant use of narrative devices is a novel that is truly novel and that transcends literary genres and epochs. Moreover, Egan manages to represent multiple temporalities simultaneously by introducing a dual track of cyclical and linear time that runs through the narrative.

In *Goon Squad* time is deep and multi-layered. The present, past and future are contemporaneous. The novel conceives of time as both linear and cyclical. The narrative moves in circles, backwards and forwards, both between and within chapters. One chapter (chapter four, 'Safari') is set in 1973, the next, (chapter five, 'You (Plural)') at the close of the twentieth century, the chapter after that (chapter six, 'X's and O's') in the late 1980s. Furthermore, the narrative jumps back and forth within chapters, too. In the separate stories, Egan makes extensive use of the narrative techniques of flashbacks and foreshadowing, or analepses and prolepses in Gérard Genette's terminology. The effect is an experience of time where past, present and future coexists. In other words, time is fused. Throughout the novel, characters recur, as do events. The novel presents time as cyclical, but there is no escaping linearity. The passage of time is a central, unavoidable concern.

I will argue that the dual conception of time as circular and linear is reflected in the novel's form. There is a deep, tightly organised structure underneath the fragmented narrative. As I will show, despite all the temporal leaps, the characters and events are fixed to a chronological timeline. I find dualism of opportunities and restrictions, of openness and limitations to be a key characteristic of Egan's novel. Duality can be found not only in her conception of time, but also the futures Egan makes available to her characters. The female characters in *Goon Squad* have increased choice compared to previous generations of American women, but they still carry the burden of chrononormativity. In Egan's novel, motherhood is more often than not the temporal end-point for the female characters. The women have more opportunities than before, but the temporal pathways have restricted outcomes. Motherhood looms, seemingly unavoidable, in the temporal distance.

Goon Squad is a novel about time, and it is a novel of its time, with its particular experience of temporality. As mentioned elsewhere in this thesis, J. Hillis Miller highlights that literary works reflect the prevalent understanding of time – be it philosophical, theological or scientific – at the time when the works were written. In *Chronoschisms*, her study of time, narrative and postmodernism, Ursula Heise points to modern scientific

technologies and contends that postmodernist novels are centrally concerned with ‘the possibility and modalities of experiencing time in the age of posthistory and the nanosecond culture’ (2). There is, notes Heise, widespread public awareness of the co-existence of radically different time scales from the nanoseconds of the internet to the billions of years used by cosmologists to calculate the age of the universe (7). Although Egan avoids the extremes of picoseconds and lightyears, there is in her novel a strong sense of multitudes of time.

Another prominent theorist of time in the postmodern, Mark Currie, identifies an anticipatory mode of being as a characteristic of contemporary culture (6). In *About Time*, Currie argues that the present era is oriented toward the future, such that ‘the understanding of the present becomes increasingly focused on the question of what it will come to mean’ (22). My claim is that *Goon Squad* reflects this contemporary mode of being which experiences the present as the object of a future memory. Several of the characters in the novel (Charlie, Allison and Sasha’s uncle Ted) at some point feel that they are looking back on themselves from some distant future. Egan achieves this anticipatory mode by a widespread use of prolepses, and nowhere more so than in chapter 4, ‘Safari’. Through a close reading of this chapter, I will discuss how the use of prolepses conveys a particularly postmodern experience of time.

The temporal field of *Goon Squad* spans the years from 1973 to an unspecified year in the 2020s. The time frame coincides with the advent of third wave feminism, the large-scale entry of women into the workforce and the fight for gender equality. Although the feminist struggle is not an explicit concern of the novel, the consequences of that struggle are evident in the lives of the female characters. Most importantly to the topic of this thesis, Egan’s women are granted possibilities for self-determination to a much larger degree than Irene Redfield and Clare Kendry in *Passing* and Maria Wyeth in *Play It As It Lays*. The greater range of opportunities available to the female characters in *Goon Squad* is reflected in both story and form. The women in *Goon Squad* are academics (Mindy, Rebecca), assistants (Lulu, Sasha), high flying PR-executives (La Doll, Stephanie) or movie stars (Kitty). The form of the novel, too, is one of multitudes and variations. No two chapters have the same setting or point of view, and the chapters are written in distinct styles. The contrast is especially sharp with Nella Larsen’s *Passing*. In Larsen’s novel, the story is told exclusively from the point of view of Irene Redfield. Moreover, Larsen’s text is sharply demarcated and tightly organised. It can be seen as a closed-circuit system, as I argued in chapter one. The strict form of *Passing*

mirrors the limited range of options available to Irene, just as the multifaceted form of *Goon Squad* points to the multiple paths available to its female characters. However, different as they may be, most of the paths to the future available in *Goon Squad* eventually end in the same traditional, chrononormative place: Motherhood. Elizabeth Freeman's concept of chrononormativity is still relevant to discuss the temporal regime facing the modern women in Egan's postmodern novel.

For most of the individual chapters, Egan relies on chronology to organise her narrative. She is unable to resist chronology, just as her characters are unable to escape the flow of (linear) time. Then comes chapter 12, 'Great Rock and Roll Pauses', told entirely in PowerPoint slides. Through the unlikely medium of corporate software, Egan manages to sidestep linearity, reinvent traditional narrative techniques and jettison chronology as her organising principle of narrative. It is significant that this chapter, 'Great Rock and Roll Pauses', where both time and narrative is cyclical and repetitive, shows us a Sasha reformed, redeemed and in tune with the cycles of nature and motherhood. In this chapter, Sasha lives Julia Kristeva's joyful, creative and cyclical women's time.

The PowerPoint chapter is worth dwelling on because the spatial organisation of 'Great Rock and Roll Pauses' challenges our understanding of what a literary text should *look* like. In 'Time in Literature', J. Hillis Miller calls literary narrative a 'spatially arrayed allegory of temporality' (91). Letters, words and sentences are arranged in sequence and must be read in a particular order to make sense. I will argue that in Egan's hands, PowerPoint becomes a tool by which to produce a new allegory of temporality. The text on Egan's slides does not have to be read in any particular order. The reader can choose what to read first, second and third. In *Chronoschisms*, Ursula Heise points to how 'print typography and the book format' place a number of 'natural' constraints on how temporality can be presented (62). In 'Great Rock and Roll Pauses', Egan overcomes some of these constraints by using the typography, figures and graphs available in PowerPoint software. By doing so, Egan points to new possibilities for fiction in the digital age. In 'Great Rock and Roll Pauses', too, a dualism is apparent. Many of the PowerPoint slides contain almost no text, and the chapter is very quickly read. Yet the chapter is, literally, about pauses. On one level, it tells the story of Sasha's son, Lincoln, and his obsession with the pauses in famous rock songs. On another level, the chapter is about being attuned to the delays and ruptures in linear time, and the opportunities for change, new connections and alternative temporalities that these pauses carry.

In this thesis chapter, my first task is to uncover the underlying temporal structure of *Goon Squad*. To do so I will employ Gérard Genette's structural theory of narrative time as presented in *Narrative Discourse*. My second task is to discuss Egan's use of prolepses to convey a specific experience of the present as an object of a future memory, taking the chapter 'On Safari' as my case study. Third, I will discuss the futures available to the female characters in the novel and highlight – and problematise – the traditionalism implied. Finally, I will examine the chapter 'Great Rock and Roll Pauses', written entirely in powerpoint slides. Here, I will argue that the use of PowerPoint enables Egan to reinvent traditional narrative techniques and present a highly original allegory of time. Moreover, this chapter offers a visual representation of Julia Kristeva's cyclical women's time.

A novel of novelty about time and music

In the short decade since its publication in 2010, *Goon Squad* has already attracted considerable – and varied – attention from the academy. Katherine D. Johnston, for instance, reads *Goon Squad* as a novel of metadata and surveillance, while Paul Martin discusses the representation of academia and academics in Egan's oeuvre. Most critics, however, have concentrated on the novel's treatment of time and/or music. David Cowart, for one, highlights how Egan stages and restages the doomed battle of youth with time, the 'goon' of her title. He reads the novel as a cautionary tale. The young might believe they will never get old and will be able to live in the present forever, but, in Cowart's words, an 'adult temporal hangover' is unavoidable (241). In chapter five, 'You (Plural)', Rhea and Jocelyne visit Lou, the once powerful and successful record producer, on his death bed. 'How did you get so old?' wonders Jocelyne (Egan 89). 'Was it all at once, in a day, or did you peter out bit by bit?' A variation of this question is posed by almost every character in the novel: What happened to me? How did I get from A to B?

David Cowart links the characters' sense of time running out with the 9/11 terrorist attacks. On that day, 'Americans awoke to the possibility that the nation itself had been overtaken by history,' Cowart argues (242). The loss of youth, innocence and authenticity that Egan's characters experience parallels America's loss of innocence and invincibility. Similarly, Aaron DeRossa interprets the novel as a response to shift in Americans' view of the future. Whereas before 9/11, the overarching narrative of American history was a teleological one of progress towards an exceptional future world, the attacks shattered this illusion. Now,

‘America’s anxiety over its lost future necessitates new scenarios’, writes DeRossa. He characterises *Goon Squad* as ‘proleptic nostalgia fiction’, that is a narrative that longs for a future exceptional status that will now never come to be (89).

The critic Heather Humann offers a reading of the novel where she applies Freud’s concept of *Nachträglichkeit* (deferred action or ‘afterwardsness’). I include Humann in my critical overview because she is one of few critics who focuses her analysis on a female character in the novel. Humann explains *Nachträglichkeit* as a mode of belated understanding or retroactive attribution of meaning to earlier events (89). She argues that *Nachträglichkeit* mirrors how readers retroactively reconstruct the events of the novel into a coherent narrative. Humann also advocates using insights from psychoanalysis to help understand the novel’s characters and their motivations. In this view, the causes of Sasha’s wayward teenage years, replete with theft, drugs and prostitution, can be found in the trauma she suffered as a child. When she was little, Sasha witnessed her parents’ abusive marriage and experienced her father’s subsequent abandonment of the family. Importantly to Humann’s analysis, Egan delays – or defers – information about Sasha’s childhood that might have made the reader more sympathetic to her earlier on. As mentioned, Humann’s study is notable for concentrating on one of the female characters in the text. To my knowledge, questions of gender have received little attention in the scholarship on *Goon Squad* thus far. I am not aware of existing criticism that zooms in on the lives of the female characters and the constraints and opportunities they face within Egan’s temporal scheme. I wish to contribute to this line of inquiry.

Music – and specifically punk music – is front and centre in the novel. Many of the characters are involved in the music industry, as musicians, executives, assistants or promoters. In interviews, Egan has underscored music’s potential for time travel. Hearing a specific song can take you back to an earlier time and a younger version of yourself (Julavits 85). Martin Moling, in his study of *Goon Squad*, calls the temporal shifts of the novel ‘punk time’. Punk time is a temporality which, in Moling’s understanding, not only has the capacity to slow down time but also offers potential for destruction and new connections. To Moling, punk time reflects ‘Egan’s attempt to bridge the past and the future, or modernism and postmodernism’ (53). Of particular relevant to this thesis, is Moling’s observation that *Goon Squad* conveys a cyclical conception of time. Characters recur, and so do events. In Moling’s view, Egan perceives of history as a sequence of similarly recurring events (72), and this view of history can give comfort and hope. I agree. A cyclical vision of time incorporates potential

for renewal, rebirth and reimagination. However, the individual characters are constrained by linear passage of time. They do get older. No one escapes the physical aging process, and there is a limit to the supply of fresh starts and new beginnings. My claim is that the tension between cyclical time and linear time is reflected in the novel's form.

Dual temporalities

In *Goon Squad*, there is a dualism of temporalities. On the one hand, time is conceived as cyclical. The past not only returns, but recurs. Characters appear, disappear and reappear. They change, transform and reinvent themselves. On the other hand, linear time is present, hidden underneath the layers of cyclical time. Time progresses. Time inevitably passes. Opportunities are lost, imagined futures fail to materialise, characters age. The ebb and flow of cyclical and linear time is reflected in the novel's narrative form. The narrative is discontinuous, fragmented and moves in circles, but all the while, underneath, there is a temporal line going from A to B. My aim in this section is to identify the underlying temporal structure

However, first I would like to note how the two chapters that book-end the novel offer a pitch-perfect illustration of the coexistence of cyclical and linear time in the narrative. At the end of chapter one, 'Found Objects', Sasha lies on the couch in her therapist Coz's office and listens to a 'faint hum that was always there' when she listened; the minutes of Coz's time: 'another, then another, then one more' (19). Similarly, at the end of chapter thirteen, 'Pure Language', the final chapter in the novel, Alex listens to 'the hum, always that hum' which is the 'sound of time passing' (348). The reference to linear time is explicit. Both Sasha and Alex are keenly attuned to the passing of time. At the same time, the narrative points to cycles and repetition. The 'hum' and the image of 'the sound of time' is introduced in the first chapter and repeated in the thirteenth. It is Sasha who first reflects on the hum of time, while Alex reiterates it after he has made a futile attempt to track Sasha down in her old apartment. In the novel's first chapter, Sasha and Alex are on a date that ends up in her apartment. In the last chapter, Alex circles back to that apartment. He imagines finding 'his young self, full of schemes and high standards, with nothing decided yet' (348). He wants to recapture lost time. In effect, Alex longs for cyclical time. Alas, linear time is inescapable. Times have changed, Sasha has moved on. Egan offers cycles and repetition, but there is no escaping linear time.

Another example that reinforces the impression of coexistence of circular and linear time in the narrative are the repeated mentions of the phrase 'A to B'. In chapter six, 'X's and O's', the musician and Bennie's old bandmate, Scotty, asks: 'I want to know what happened between A and B' (106). Chapter six is the last chapter in the A section of the novel. The first chapter of the B-part, chapter seven, is called 'A to B'. It links directly to Scotty's question in the preceding chapter, and also provides a link between the two parts of the novel. Moreover, in chapter seven, Bosco's new album is discussed. The album is titled 'A to B', and its title is repeated twice (119 and 134). Bosco explains the choice of title: 'How did I go from being a rock star to being a fat fuck no one cares about?', which echoes and repeats Scotty's question in chapter six. The image of a straight line from A to B is repeated and circulated in the novel.

The entire literary aesthetic of the twentieth century has been largely characterised by the attempt to write against time *as succession*, claims Herbert Grabes in 'Writing Against Time' (370). Modernist and postmodern writers have revolted against narratives where events and appearances are structured in a linear sequence. Instead, literary artists of the past century are concerned with time as a mode of coexistence or as a mode of permanence, and Jennifer Egan is no exception. In the scattered and discontinuous narrative of *Goon Squad*, questions of temporal coexistence, interdependencies and interconnections are at the forefront.

In *Chronoschisms*, Ursula Heise argues that in late-capitalist societies the accelerated temporal rhythms have led to drastically shortened temporal horizons at the expense of long-term planning and coherence. In other words, time today passes so quickly that we do not have time to plan ahead, and we gain little overview. In literature, Heise sees the high-speed culture of time reflected in fragmented plots and the demise of master narratives. She points to how many postmodern narratives present sequences of events in contradictory or mutually exclusive versions 'that do not allow the reader to infer a coherent story or reality' (53). In this vein, Jennifer Smith posits a lack of coherence in *Goon Squad*. Smith considers *Goon Squad* a short story cycle, and argues that the separate stories resist forming a unified whole (142). She identifies the cycle's main action as spanning from 1973 to 2021, and claims 'any definite identification of when a story happens' is thwarted. I disagree with Smith. I think it is possible to identify when the separate stories of *Goon Squad* 'happen', as will be shown.

In my view, *Goon Squad* both conforms to, challenges and indeed transcends the postmodernist trend of fragmentation. Yes, Egan's narrative is discontinuous, but it does present a coherent whole. Heise identifies contradictory versions of events as a hallmark of postmodernism, but events in *Goon Squad* are *not* mutually exclusive. The action in *Goon*

Squad can be plotted on a common time-line. However disjointed and open-ended the text may be, *Goon Squad* presents the reader with vistas of connections and interlocking lives, and offers a highly structured view of the human quest for ‘redemption, transformation’ (19). In Egan’s novel, linearity coincides with circularity. There is nothing arbitrary about the many chance-encounters in *Goon Squad*. Casual mentions of characters and events turn out to be significant and the numerous references to dates of events and the ages of characters point to a strict, albeit hidden, chronology. There is a tight structure underlying the fragmented narrative.

As discussed in the introduction to this thesis, Gérard Genette distinguishes between story, what happens, and narrative, how the story is told. Narrative anachronies is his term for the various types of discordances between the ordering of events in the story and in the narrative. An anachrony occurs any time the order of the narrative diverges from the order of the story. In *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, establishing the order of the story is no easy task, not least because there is not one main story, no first narrative, as Genette would call it. Moreover, time is portrayed as cyclical, and where does a cycle start or end? However, even if there is no overarching story connecting the two parts and the thirteen chapters, there is a common chronology underlying all thirteen narratives. This chronology fixes the narratives in a common temporal scheme and gives the reader a sense of coherence. The chronology also underscores the conception of time as linear. The individual chapters jump back and forth in time, but all chapters are set between the early 1970s and the 2020s. The chapters can be fixed to distinct points in a common timeline by working from textual clues.

As befits a novel whose main theme is the passage of time, *Goon Squad* is replete with references to the ages of characters and the years passed since certain events. Importantly, I think the constant mentions of years passed and ages acquired are tools to alert the reader to the underlying linear structure of the novel. It is as if Egan is daring the reader to test her and find inconsistencies in her chronology. Sasha has worked for Bennie ‘twelve years’ (12), she’s lived in her Lower East Side walk-up ‘six years’ (13), Sow’s Ear Records moved to Tribeca ‘six years ago’ (22), Bennie sold his label to the multinational crude-oil extractors ‘five years ago’ (24), and so on and on. Likewise, at first appearance, many characters are presented with their age. When the reader first hears of them Sasha is 35 (6), Bennie is 44 (23), Charlie is 20 (57), the Samburu warrior who sings for Lou and his family on safari is 19 (64), Lulu is nine (154), Kitty is a washed up has-been at 28 (153), Alison is 12 and her brother, Lincoln, is 13 (244). Working from these clues, it is possible to establish the setting

for each of the thirteen chapters, see ‘**Appendix: Chapter settings in *A Visit from the Goon Squad***’ for a detailed overview.

Following Genette, I will label the thirteen chapters A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H, I, J, K, L, M, according to their appearance in the narrative. The numbers 1-13 gives their chronological position. The relationship between the order of narrative time and story time can be expressed in the following sequence: A10, B9, C2, D1, E6, F3, G8, H11, I7, J5, K4, L12, M13. The last chapter in the novel, chapter thirteen, ‘Pure Language’, is also the last chapter chronologically. Otherwise, anachrony is the rule. However, there is a definite order to the disorder. The temporal field of the novel spans six decades, from the early 1970’s to the late 2020’s (not 2021, as Jennifer Smith claims (151)). Within this field, the chronology works out. For example, Charlie is fourteen when she is on safari in 1973, and she’s just turned twenty in 1979. Bennie’s son, Chris, is nine in chapter two: ‘The Gold Cure’, and he was in kindergarten when Bennie and Steph, still married, moved to Crandale in chapter seven: ‘A to B’.

The years match up, the different narratives fit together, but the question remains: Why do we care if the dates match? J. Hillis Miller stresses that we all require an ordering of events past and present to make sense of the world and ourselves. Egan presents thirteen different narratives that circulate between past, present and future. Yet the chapters fit into a complex but *unified* temporal order. As discussed above, Heise argues that the narrative of many postmodernist novels present sequences of events that are mutually exclusive, preventing the reader from any sense of a coherent story. Not so in *Goon Squad*. In Egan’s novel, chronological coherence is one element that provides order to the disordered narrative.

Here, it is worth noting that Genette uses Proust’s *In Search of Lost Time* to develop his theory of narrative discourse. Egan, in an interview with Mark Alford, identifies Proust as a main source of inspiration for her novel. (The two epigraphs to the novel are both from Proust’s opus.) Genette points to the retrospectively synthetic character of Proustian narrative, and highlights how the narrator of *Lost Time* holds all of the narrative threads simultaneously and understands the ‘unifying significance of his story’ (78). By contrast, in *Goon Squad*, there is no single, unifying narrator. The thirteen chapters are told from the point of view of different characters. The main character in one chapter disappears in the next only to, sometimes, reappear – however briefly – at a much later stage. In *Goon Squad*, the reader herself must work out the chronology, interconnections and significance of events. This gives the reader an ‘omniscience that is almost godlike’, as Cathleen Schine notes in *The New York*

Review of Books. In Genette's view, Proustian narrative wipes out "chance, contingency, arbitrariness" (57) and captures the life of the narrator in a "web of structure and the cohesiveness of a meaning" (57). Egan manages to achieve the same effect without the use of a unifying narrator. Instead she relies on narrative devices and a strict chronological coherence to present a cohesive, meaningful reality.

Fusing past, present and future

Mark Currie notes how a fictional narrative encourages us to think of the past as present and the present as a future past (5). He argues that narrative theory has exhaustively explored how the past becomes present through themes of memory and retrospect, but has paid less attention to how the present is experienced as a mode of anticipation of future memories. My claim is that Egan's extensive use of temporal shifts both backwards (analepses) and forwards (prolepses) make *A Visit from the Goon Squad* a rich source for narrative study, both in terms of how the past impacts the present and how the present is experienced as an object of future memory. For her part, Ursula Heise claims that postmodernist texts do not usually 'celebrate the interlacing of memory and expectation in the individual's experience of time' (1). *Goon Squad* can be seen as the exception to the rule. I find that Egan, through her employment of analepses and prolepses, fuses modernist conceptions of the role of recall and memory with postmodernist experiences of the present as instantaneous and as a mode of anticipation.

Genette classifies anachronies into backward-looking (analepses) and forward-looking (prolepses). An anachrony can reach into the past or the future, either more or less far from the 'present' moment. The temporal distance is the anachrony's *reach*. The duration of story time while looking forward or back is the anachrony's *extent*. To analyse the use of analepses in *Goon Squad*, I will diverge from my focus on female characters. The role of memory, which Genette labels as a predominant mode of analepsis, is especially prominent in *Goon Squad*'s chapter two 'The Gold Cure'. This chapter is told from the point of view of Bennie Salazar, the husband of Stephanie and boss of Sasha and, later, Lulu. I choose to focus on a chapter with a male protagonist even though the main interest of my thesis is the treatment of time as it relates to women. I include a discussion of 'The Gold Cure' because this chapter provides the best examples of Egan's use of narrative technique to fuse past and present.

The story of the 'The Gold Cure' is straightforward: Bennie, 44, successful music executive decides to go visit a band, Stop/Go. Bennie picks up his son, Chris, meets his assistant, Sasha, visits the band and drives both his son and his assistant home. End of chapter. The extent of this first narrative is a single day in the present life of Bennie Salazar. The problem, for Bennie, is that his past will not leave him alone. His 'shame memories' (20) are painfully present. The first shame memory, which serves as the chapter's second analepsis (the first being a brief mention of when Bennie signed the sister act 'a couple of years back' (20)), occurs while Bennie is in his morning meeting. The memory takes Bennie back to another meeting, this one with the Mother Superior of a nunnery. The analepsis' reach is 'twenty years ago was it? More?' (21), and its extent is a couple of weeks, from when Bennie first hears the nuns sing to his disastrous meeting with the Mother Superior. At the end of this meeting with the Mother, Bennie had 'approached the cutout square to say goodbye (here, Bennie thrashed in his conference chair, anticipating the moment it was all leading up to)' (21). Note the temporal leap within the sentence, back to the narrative's present, which functions to emphasise the intensity of the memory to Bennie.

As his day progresses, Bennie will be haunted by memories of him calling a jazz pianist 'incompetent' (24), of him being called a 'hairball' (31) by two colleagues, of discovering lice in his son's hair and of a woman, that Bennie wanted to sleep with, walking in on him while he was defecating and surrounded by a 'miasma of annihilating stink' (33). In Genette's terminology, all of these analepses are external, partial and implicit. They are implicit because there is no explicit notice in the text of where the analepses end and the first narrative takes up again. They are partial because they recount moments in the past that remain isolated and do not rejoin the first narrative. And they are external because their entire duration, or extent, remains outside the extent of the first narrative (the day in the life of Bennie Salazar at 44). To Bennie, however, the 'shame memories' are neither partial nor external; the painful memories take over his present completely. Indeed, the memories threaten to erase his present self: 'But now it was back – oh, it was back, bringing waves of shame so immense they seemed to engulf whole parts of Bennie's life and drag them away' (33). Egan's use of this narrative device illustrates how the past is part of the present, however unwanted that presence of the past may be. Bennie experiences his past and his present simultaneously.

'The present is a story yet to be told', writes Mark Currie in *About Time* (5). He argues that in contemporary culture the present is experienced as a mode of anticipation. We live the

present in anticipation of the story we will tell later on. The present is envisaged as a future past. This contemporary experience of the present is reflected in *Goon Squad*. For example, in chapter twelve, 'Great Rock and Roll Pauses', Allison imagines herself as a grown-up woman coming back to the home she shares with her parents and brother and says she will 'always miss it' (307). 'It' being the present she is actually living in the 'now' of story time. Throughout *Goon Squad*, Egan employs the narrative tool of prolepses to great effect to underscore both how the characters experience the present as a future memory and to convey a circular, repetitive sense of time. It is to a discussion of Egan's use of prolepses that I now turn.

A prolepsis is defined as any narrative move that narrates or evokes in advance an event that will take place later. According to Genette and Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, in the Western tradition, prolepses are used less frequently than analepses. However, claims Currie, there has been an enormous increase in the use of prolepsis in fiction in the last three decades (22). Currie sees this trend towards prolepsis as a reflection of society's more future-oriented sense of time, and he argues that 'the understanding of the present becomes increasingly focused on the question of what it will come to mean' (22).

Goon Squad's first chapter: 'Found Objects' contains an interesting reflection of this mode of being where the present is experienced as the object of a future memory. When Alex visits Sasha's apartment, it jars Sasha to think of herself as a 'glint in the hazy memories that Alex would struggle to organize a year or two from now: *Where was that place with the bathtub? Who was that girl?*' (14) (italics in original.) Sasha is experiencing the present as the object of *someone else's* future memory. In the very last chapter: 'Pure Language', the reader learns that Alex *does* think of Sasha again, but not in the way Sasha imagines in chapter one. Rather, Sasha is, initially, lodged in Alex's memory because of her connection to Bennie Salazar: 'The girl had worked for him – Alex remembered this clearly – but it was practically all he could remember; her name, what she'd looked like, what exactly they'd done together, those details had been erased...' (318). However, later in 'Pure Language', Alex and Bennie take a walk on the Lower East Side and end up outside Sasha's old building. There, Alex experiences a 'hot-cold flash of recognition, a shiver of *déjà vu*, as if he were returning to a place that no longer existed' (347), and he does remember 'a bathtub in the kitchen – yes, she'd had one of those!' (347). Genette would label this as an internal homodiegetic analepsis. It is his term for a narrative device where the narrative openly, sometimes explicitly, retraces its own path. The prolepses in chapter one and the analepses in chapter

thirteen frame the narrative and ties the fragmented narrative together. It is yet another example of how Egan, through narrative devices, conveys a conception of time where past and present are fused.

If Egan in chapter two: 'The Gold Cure' employed the quintessentially modernist technique of narrative shifts triggered by memory, in chapter four: 'Safari', she follows the current fashion for prolepses. The mode of experiencing the present as an object of future memory is especially striking in 'Safari'. The first thing to note, is that the chapter is written in the present. The second, is the almost exaggerated use of prolepses. I identify seven separate prolepses in 'Safari':

- First Prolepsis:
 - Thirty five years from now, in 2008, this warrior will be caught in the tribal violence between the Kikuyu and the Luo and will die in a fire. He'll have had four wives and sixty-three grandchildren by then, one of whom, a boy named Joe, will inherit his *lalema* (...). Joe will go to college at Columbia and study engineering, becoming an expert in visual robotic technology (...) He will marry an American named Lulu and remain in New York, where he'll invent a scanning device that becomes standard issue for crowd security. He and Lulu will buy a loft in Tribeca. (64-65)
- Second prolepsis: 'Rolph closes his eyes and opens them again. He thinks, I'll remember this night for the rest of my life. And he's right' (66).
- Third prolepsis: 'The member's of Ramsey's safari have gained a story they'll tell for the rest of their lives. It will prompt some of them, years from now, to search for each other on Google and Facebook, unable to resist the wish-fulfillment fantasy these portals offer: *What ever happened to...?*' (74)
- Fourth prolepsis: 'Four years from now, at eighteen' (84) Charlie will 'join a cult across the Mexican border whose charismatic leader promotes a diet of raw eggs' (84). Charlie will develop a cocaine habit, suffer a string of failed relationships and try to broker peace between her father and brother who will stop speaking to each other.
- Fifth prolepsis: Lou 'will marry Mindy because that's what winning means, and because Mindy's eagerness to conclude this odd episode and return to her studies will last until precisely the moment she opens the door to her Berkeley apartment and walks into the smell of simmering lentils' (85).

- Sixth prolepsis: Mindy is ‘thinking of Albert, as she will periodically after marrying Lou and having two daughters’ (86). Mindy will work as a travel agent, complete her PhD and begin an academic career at 45.
- Seventh prolepsis: Charlie dances with her brother, and ‘this particular memory is one she’ll return to again and again, for the rest of her life, long after Rolph has shot himself in the head in their father’s house at twenty-eight’ (87).

All seven prolepses are external, that is they take place later than the story of the first narrative (the safari). External prolepses, writes Genette (68), function most often as epilogues, serving to continue one or another line of action to its logical conclusion, as is the case with the seven prolepses in this chapter. Both the second and seventh prolepses function as testimonies to the intensity of the present memory. Moreover, they reflect the mode of experiencing the present as the object of a future memory as discussed by Mark Currie. Both Rolph and Charlie are aware, in the present, that they will remember these moments for the rest of their lives. Moreover, these prolepses serve to authenticate the significance of the present experience. That Charlie dances with her brother is especially important because Rolph will eventually kill himself, and she will look back on this moment as a significant, happy one.

Genette distinguishes between completing prolepses, those that fill in ahead of time a later blank, and repeating prolepses, those that - still ahead of time - double, however slightly, a narrative section to come. In this chapter, prolepsis seven is a completing prolepsis, filling in the blank (‘shot himself in the head in their father’s house at twenty-eight’ (87)) that will be left in chapter five: ‘You (Plural)’. In chapter five, we learn that ‘Rolph didn’t make it’ (94), and that it was a “tragedy” (94), but in this later chapter, there is no mention of how he died. Prolepsis one is an example of a repeating prolepses. It includes an advance mention of Lulu, who will appear in two later chapters. First, at age nine, as the daughter of disgraced former PR-executive LaDoll in chapter eight, ‘Selling the General’. Then, in her twenties, as a graduate student at Barnard *and* Bennie’s full-time assistant in the last chapter: ‘Pure Language’. The warrior’s grandchild Joe, first mentioned in prolepses one, will also reappear in the last chapter with Lulu, ‘who was now holding hands with a statuesque black man’ (345).

Repeating prolepses refer in advance to an event that will be told in full later, so repeating prolepses function as advance notices, writes Genette. Advance notices create expectations in

a reader's mind. Genette points to how in Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*, there is plenty of explicit advance notices such as 'we shall meet him again... we shall see how' (75). There are none of these in *Goon Squad*, as indeed there cannot be, because there is no unifying narrator to highlight clues and help the reader pay attention. In *Goon Squad*, the reader has to piece the story together. Part of the pleasure of reading Egan's novel is recognising and recalling characters and connections throughout the novel.

Ursula Heise identifies 'the expectation of and desire for instant availability' as a key feature of the postmodern experience of temporality (25). I think that increased use of prolepses in fiction (and film) the past three decades can be seen as a reflection of our culture's demand for instant gratification and shortened attention spans. We need to know straight away what will happen to the characters. We expect quick and easy access. By extensive use of external prolepses, Egan provides quick and easy access to the characters' futures. We do not have to wait for long to find out what becomes of them. The proleptic epilogues in 'Safari' fulfil our need to know the characters' future fates instantly. Egan's use of external prolepses is also significant because it contributes to a conception of the future as intimately linked to the present. Egan fuses the characters' future into her story of their present (on safari). The narrative circles from the present to the future, and back again. Egan thus reduces the distance between present and future, fusing the future with the present-day.

Chrononormative women

Goon Squads spans more than five decades, from the 1970s to the 2020s. In that half century the possibilities for American women to imagine, plan and determine their future vastly expanded. The vista of opportunity available to Lulu, Dolly's daughter, and Rebecca, Alex' wife, in *Goon Squad's* final chapter, set in the near future of the 2020s, vastly exceed that facing Irene Redfield and Clare Kendry in *Passing*, set in the 1920s, and Maria Wyeth in *Play It As It Lays*, set in the late 1960s. Although not an explicit concern in *Goon Squad*, the increase in opportunities for women can be traced through the novel. Whereas the female characters in the two other novels discussed in this thesis end up dead (Clare Kendry) or mad (Maria Wyeth), the women in *Goon Squad* are given fresh starts. In chapter one, 'Found Objects', Sasha and Coz are creating a story of 'redemption, of fresh beginnings and second chances' (9). Egan extends the opportunity for reinvention and redemption to most of her characters. However, it is a point of striking traditionalism in this non-traditional novel that redemption for almost all of the female characters takes the form of the socially sanctioned

role of wife and/or mother. Moreover, many of the female characters are defined by their relationship to men. This is yet another dualism running through Egan's novel: A revolutionary expanse of opportunities for women resulting in traditional outcomes, independent women defined by their proximity to powerful men.

In *Goon Squad*, time ebbs and flows, as do fortunes and social standings. Several of the female characters attempt one kind of future, fail, and try again. *Goon Squad* is a story of second chances. Mindy, Lou's girlfriend in chapter four 'Safari', marries Lou and bears him two daughters. But her stint as the wife of a powerful music producer ends in divorce and near bankruptcy. She regroups, and starts over, finally commencing an academic career at 45. Dolly/LaDoll falls sensationally from the heights of the public relations hierarchy. After serving her time in prison, Dolly copyedits textbook and teaches English by phone to make ends meet. Her fortunes change again when she is asked to do PR for a genocidal dictator. The has-been-actress that Dolly enlists to make the dictator more palatable, Kitty Jackson, also experiences reversals of fortune. A movie starlet with a couple of blockbusters to her name, at one point Kitty decides she can't 'take the bullshit' (153). A catalogue of bad behaviour follows, but what seems to have really ended her career is when she refused an 'überpowerful producer' who tried to maneuver her into bed (153). A Hollywood starlet refuses male power at her peril, and Kitty's career is effectively over. That is, until Dolly appears and offers her the part of a dictator's girlfriend.

Egan's women fall on hard times, but Egan grants them hope for reinvention. Life – and time – moves in circles. Characters can start again. But in *Goon Squad*, as in life, new starts are never easy and not always successful. There is no guarantee the characters will traverse from A to B even on their second try. In chapter seven, titled 'A to B', Stephanie has given her husband, Bennie, and their marriage a second chance. It fails spectacularly when Steph discovers that Bennie has slept with her tennis-partner. In chapter five, 'You (Plural)', Jocelyne laments her 'lost time' (90), the decades lost to Lou and hard drugs. She's been clean a year, her 'longest yet' (95). Jocelyne has tried to quit drugs before, but relapsed. There is no guarantee she'll succeed this time either. The possibilities of second chances and new starts echoes Julia Kristeva's notion of a circular and regenerative women's time. In 'Women's Time', Kristeva calls for the reintroduction of a cyclical, generative and creative temporal order. Kristeva's aim is to merge a cyclical women's time with a linear masculine time. In my view, Egan comes very close to this goal in *Goon Squad*.

The female characters in *Goon Squad* operate in a world where most of the positions of power are held by men, just as in *Passing* and *Play It As It Lays*. The women are wives (Stephanie), girlfriends (Mindy and Jocelyne), daughters (Charlie) and assistants (Sasha and Lulu) to powerful and successful men. In chapter thirteen, 'Pure Language', Alex initially remembers Sasha because she used to work for Bennie Salazar. He does not remember her as an independent person. Kitty is repackaged as a (male) dictator's girlfriend, a part for which she is handsomely compensated. Her worth is tightly connected to her sex appeal. However, at the end of the novel, in the chapter set in the near future, Egan offers an example of reversal of gender roles. Chapter thirteen, 'Pure Language', the last chapter both chronologically and in the narrative, presents a future where women have status and power. It is Rebecca, Alex's wife, who is an 'academic star' (331). The husband, Alex, stays home and takes care of the kid. Furthermore, although Lulu is working as Bennie's assistant at this point, she is nobody's push-over. 'She's going to run the world,' predicts Bennie (343). And she just might. A time and space of female power may be on the horizon.

It is perfectly possible to see *Goon Squad* as a story of maternal love and paternal failure. According to Jennifer Smith, the breaks in time in the novel mirror breaks in genealogy (154). Severed biological family relations abound in the novel. Sasha's father left when she was six, while Jocelyne's father moves away when she's a teenager. Lou, for his part has left a 'contrail of personal upheaval that is practically visible behind him' (63): A string of failed marriages and children with at least three different women. Bennie's habitual infidelity results in divorce from Steph, and he struggles to connect and communicate with his oldest son, Chris. (Bennie will be given a second chance. In chapter thirteen, he is married to a much younger, beautiful wife and has a new child.) The absent fathers contrast with the loyal mothers, of which there are many in *Goon Squad*. Dolly will do practically anything to ensure Lulu's education and happiness, Mindy abandons her academic ambition for many years and works as a travel agent to support her kids. Sasha's mother foots the bill for Ted's search for Sasha in Naples. And Jocelyne's mother lets her 43-year-old, drug addicted daughter move back in with her and spends her evening testing Jocelyne's Spanish 'with flash cards' (91). The female characters in *Goon Squad* do not abandon their children. The mothers' love is a constant. Jocelyne's mother is there through the ups and downs of addiction. Sasha's mother continues to look for her while Sasha runs away, tries to commit suicide and runs away again. And Sasha herself follows her son Lincoln through endless repetitive discussion of pauses in rock songs. Maternal love is an eternal constant, Egan seems

to be saying. In this she echoes Julia Kristeva's conception of a monumental, static women's time. The mothers in *Goon Squad* show unconditional, unwavering love for an Other, what Julia Kristeva hails as the ultimate experience of motherhood.

It is almost circumspect how many of the female character's first tries, second chances and attempts at redemption all lead to the two historically and socially sanctioned roles of wife and mother. For example, Rhea, Jocelyne's and Bennie's bandmate in the Flaming Dildos, goes from punk rocker to a married mother of three children. Charlie, Lou's daughter, joins a cult and develops a severe cocaine habit. But she, too, recovers and reimagines herself. Her prize? Law school and a baby boy. Sasha eventually obtains her redemption and reunites with her college boyfriend. In chapter twelve, 'Great Rock and Roll Pauses', reformed and redeemed Sasha is a surgeon's wife and mother of two children.

Elizabeth Freeman's notion of chrononormativity is worth revisiting in this context. Chrononormativity refers to the idea that in public and private life, there is a proper way of ordering and spending one's time. Properly temporalized bodies serve the economic interests of the family, society and the nation. The Sasha we meet in chapter one, 'Found Objects', is not properly temporalized. She is 36, still single, has no children and is an unemployed kleptomaniac. She is not a productive member of society by any traditional measure. Fast forward to chapter twelve, 'Great Rock and Roll Pauses', and Sasha is a woman reborn. We are pleased with her recovery. She has become a wife and mother, an upstanding member of the community, chrononormativity has performed its magic.

In such a narratologically adventurous and technically daring novel, I find it surprising that Egan takes so few risks in the futures she imagines for women. None of her characters voluntarily opt out of motherhood or heterosexual relations. On the contrary, the female characters have internalised chrononormative standards. In college, Sasha 'feels behind', because she is older than the other students (201). Chrononormativity demands that Sasha finish college before a certain age, and Sasha feels the pressure. So, she takes 'six courses a semester plus summer school so she can graduate in three years' (201). Jocelyne, too, mourns her 'lost time', the years of heavy drug use. When Jocelyne reunites with her former bandmate Rhea, now mother-of-three, at the deathbed of Jocelyne's former boyfriend Lou, it is her own lack of children that especially upsets Jocelyne. "You have three children", Jocelyne sobs into Rhea's hair (91), before she asks: "What do I have?" (91). Jocelyne's experiences count for nothing compared to Rhea's three children. Freeman stresses how chrononormativity entails the belief that time must be productive. The past must be useful as

stepping stones to the future. In Sasha's case, she spent her late-teens shoplifting and turning tricks in Naples. Jocelyne partied and did drugs all through her twenties and well into her thirties. Charlie, Rolph's sister, joined a cult and developed a cocaine habit so severe that it required partial reconstruction of her nose (84). None of these are productive pursuits by the standards of chrononormativity. But other standards potentially do exist.

The queer theorist Judith Halberstam offers interesting perspectives on normativity in her book *In a Queer Time and Place*. She argues that in Western cultures, longevity is the most desirable future, and the pursuit of long life the ultimate goal (4). People who live in rapid bursts, Halberstam uses drug addicts as an example, are characterised as 'immature and even dangerous' (4). In *Goon Squad*, Jocelyne, Charlie and Sasha are not threatening characters, but there is a strong sense of arrested development surrounding them. Halberstam argues that alternative psychic states – drug-induced or not – can reveal the artificiality of 'our privileged constructions of time and activity' (4), but *Goon Squad* does not challenge these privileged and chrononormative constructions. I think it is puzzling that Egan, the experimental writer, does not experiment more with female life trajectories.

Heteronormative is another label that can be justifiably attached to *Goon Squad*. There is plenty of sex in the novel, and the women are as sexually active as the men. But the sex is almost without exception heterosexual. Of the plethora of characters in the novel, there is only one, Rob, Sasha's friend in college, who references a queer sexual experience. In high school, Rob spent an hour alone in the car with his teammate, James. It happened only once, and Rob is quick to reassure Sasha 'I'm not a fag' (200). Apart from this, there is a brief mention of Jocelyne's father, who she recognises as 'one of the leather boys hugging outside the White Swallow' (45). That's it with the gay sex, all the other sexual escapades are safely straight. Moreover, time is not kind to the gay characters. Rob drowns in his early twenties, while Jocelyne's father dies of AIDS. I think it is puzzling that Egan excludes queer sexuality from her rich, sprawling novel. None of her female characters log any lesbian adventures or queer sexual experiences. In a novel so richly populated and with such a long timeline, I find the lack of sexual difference oddly anachronistic.

Judith Halberstam argues that queer uses of time develop as alternatives and in opposition to institutions of family, heterosexuality and reproduction (1). Halberstam encourages us to think about queerness as a result of 'strange temporalities' and 'imaginative life schedules' (1). In her view, queerness has the potential to open up new life narratives and alternative relations to time. In my view, *Goon Squad* is novel about how we experience time

and how time can be represented and understood in new ways. I think it is to the detriment of this otherwise exceptional novel that queer lives are nowhere to be found on its densely populated pages. To include neither queer female characters nor female characters who refuse the chrononormative expectation of motherhood, seems to me to be a missed opportunity.

Escaping linearity

Chapter twelve of the *Goon Squad*, called ‘Great Rock and Roll Pauses’, marks a distinct change in both temporal and spatial representation. The chapter is written as a series of PowerPoint slides from the point of view of Sasha’s twelve-year-old daughter, Alison Blake. In her review of *Goon Squad*, Pankaj Mishra questions the artistic merit of this chapter. I do not share Mishra’s concern. In fact, quite the opposite. I will argue that ‘Great Rock and Roll Pauses’ is a highly original representation of time. In this chapter, Egan represents time as circular, repetitive and creative, echoing Julia’s Kristeva’s notion of a circular women’s time.

J. Hillis Miller posits that time is inscrutable and unrepresentable directly. Therefore, it can only be expressed allegorically. Miller calls a literary narrative a ‘spatially arrayed allegory of temporality’ (91). For eleven chapters, the *Goon Squad* adheres to a traditional spatial display of signs on the page. Letters, words and sentences are arranged one after another, horizontally. They must be read in a certain order to make sense. In chapter twelve, the use of PowerPoint allows Egan to present a strikingly different allegory of time. First of all, the slides are printed vertically, so the reader has to physically rotate the book ninety degrees to be able to read the text on the page. To continue reading and progress in the narrative, the reader has to turn the page from bottom to top, rather than from right to left. One reads the chapter *vertically*, not horizontally. This spatial – *physical* – shift both highlights and challenges our preconceptions of what a written book should look and *feel* like. At the same time, this spatial shift reflects technological change as technology changes reading habits. Digitalised texts are read – scrolling – from top to bottom, and the scrolling method of reading is mirrored in the set-up of the chapter. The form fits the narrative because it is written from the point of view of a 12-year-old and set some time in the 2020s. Alison is definitely a child of the digital age, and that is reflected in the chapter’s form.

‘Great Rock and Roll Pauses’ also marks a significant increase in reading speed. In *Chronoschisms*, Ursula Heise highlights the accelerated temporal rhythms of late-capitalist technologies and consumption as an important influence on the plot and tempo of many

postmodernist novels (6). Our contemporary culture is one of high speed and accelerated pace, and that tempo is mirrored in the form of this chapter. The chapter is stretched over more than 70 pages, and several pages contain no more than three words ('After Lincoln's Game' (245), 'Dad is Working' (249), 'In My Room' (260)). Yet, 'Great Rock and Roll Pauses' is more than double the length of any of the other chapters. However, in terms of *reading time*, i.e. the time it takes to read, it is the book's shortest. The 70 pages whizz by, indicative of the ever-increasing speed of the future. The text is stripped down to the point where a pause while Alison and her father stand on the deck outside their house is described by a simple, blank bubble (290). At this point, a reminder of the lay-out of Joan Didion's *Play It As It Lays* is in order. As discussed in chapter two, *Play It* is a sparse novel, quickly read, with several pages containing very little text. There are great expanses of white space in Didion's novel. In both *Play It* and 'Great Rock and Roll Pauses', the speed of reading is a reflection of the particular experience of time in the 1960s and 2020s, respectively. *Play It*, written decades before the advent of personal computers and the internet, was a quick read. 'Great Rock and Roll Pauses', set in the near future, is quicker still.

Using the standards of the PowerPoint allows Egan to suspend chronology and challenge the traditional textual allegory of time as horizontal. My argument is that in this chapter, Egan represents time as circular. First of all, it is striking how many of the PowerPoint slides contain circles, bubbles or wheels. Several slides contain Venn-diagrams, where circles interlace and overlap. Text is placed inside boxes, circles or bubbles, and many of the slides can be read from various directions. This enables multiple readings of the same slide. The reader can start from the right and move to the left, from the bottom and up or diagonally. Martin Moling notes that the organisation of figures and text on the PowerPoint slides deprives the flow of time of its dominant role as the principal force structuring narrative (65). The reader can choose where to start and in what order to read. The order of the narrative is no longer fixed. Time is not linear, it is circular. There is no given beginning and no definite end. As Ursula Heise discusses in *Chronoschisms*, there is a long tradition of postmodern writers experimenting with non-linear typography to suggest that every page can be read in a variety of itineraries (63). Jennifer Egan takes her cue from this tradition, but in my view, she transcends it. By using PowerPoint software, she shows how non-linear narrative can be represented in new ways.

The PowerPoint format enables Egan to give visual representations (or allegories) of narrative devices. Take the iterative as an example. Genette defines the iterative as telling

once what happened frequently. An example would be describing once a dinner that used to happen regularly, ritually every Sunday. The very first sentence of *Goon Squad* is a traditional, textual representation of the iterative: “It began the usual way, in the bathroom of the Lassimo Hotel” (1). Sasha will proceed to tell once (theft of wallet) what has happened many times (a lifetime of ‘sticky fingers’ (346)). In chapter thirteen: ‘Great Rock and Roll Pauses’, Egan reinvents this narrative device. The slide titled ‘Annoying habit #48’ (247) can be seen as a spatial and visual representation of the iterative. This slide shows what adult, and presumably no longer shoplifting, Sasha says every time she meets the other mothers at school, and what she says to her husband every evening. The circular arrows that connect the pieces of dialogue both challenge chronology and hint at the circular nature of time, which is a recurring theme of the novel.

The PowerPoint slides in ‘Great Rock and Roll Pauses’ are ostensibly made by Sasha’s daughter, Allison. She offers an adolescent’s perspective on her mother. The character of Sasha was last featured in the chapter immediately preceding ‘Great Rock and Roll Pauses’. Chapter eleven, ‘Goodbye My Love’ is told from the point of view of Sasha’s uncle, Ted, who was travelled to Naples, Italy, to search for his wayward niece. ‘Goodbye My Love’ is set in 1990 (see Appendix 1). In this chapter, nineteen-year-old Sasha has run away from her family and is supporting herself through theft and occasional prostitution in a foreign country. The next chapter, ‘Great Rock and Roll Pauses’ jumps three decades forwards in time. We meet a Sasha changed and reformed. She has achieved the ‘redemption, transformation’ (19) she so desperately craved at the start of chapter one, ‘Found Objects’, quoted in the introduction to this thesis. How was the redemption achieved? Little textual information is given. We know from chapter one that Sasha sought treatment for kleptomania for a time. In the PowerPoint chapter, Allison will tell us that Sasha reconnected with her college boyfriend, Drew, and moved to Pakistan to be with him. Apart from this, the details are vague or non-existent on *how* Sasha recovered from her kleptomania and *what happened* in the thirty years between thieving in Naples and making art in the desert where she now lives.

What I find interesting is not so much how and when Sasha transformed, but how her ‘redemption, transformation’ is portrayed. In chapter twelve, Sasha is happily married to Drew, a surgeon, and has two children. The chrononormative nature of her temporal destiny has already been discussed, what I would like to highlight here is the way redeemed, reimagined, recovered Sasha seems to be living more in tune with a cyclical and repetitive

temporality. The circular form of the narrative in 'Great Rock and Roll Pauses' underscores the repetitive, cyclical form of Sasha's present life. Moreover, she makes sculptures in the desert out of trash and her children's old toys. Eventually, her sculptures fall apart, which is 'part of the process' (250). Sasha uses what she finds in nature to make art, and the art itself follows nature's cycle of decay. Julie Kristeva highlights the endless returns of natural cycles as connoted with the feminine. In her adult life, Sasha can be seen to be close to inhabiting such a natural and cyclical temporality.

Kristeva argues that through motherhood, women learn to love another human being unconditionally. I think Sasha's obvious love and connection with her children is one of the most moving aspects of the PowerPoint chapter. Her son, Lincoln, is on the autism spectrum, and his obsession with the pauses in famous rock songs make up a significant part of the chapter's story, if story is the appropriate word. The slide titled 'Dad vs. Mom' (253) shows the difference in how Drew and Sasha communicate with their son. Drew asks: 'You spend time with any other kids today?' (253) Sasha takes Lincoln's interest seriously and engages with him: 'I don't think of Bowie as a chicken, so there must be some reason he opted to pause there'. Later, Drew asks Sasha how the obsession with pauses in rock songs is 'helping him connect to other kids' (285). Sasha answers: 'It connects him to the world'. She accepts her son for what he is and partakes in his interest. She connects with him in a deep and meaningful way. In chapter one, I argued that the circular and repetitive temporality portrayed in *Passing* was deeply limiting and restrictive to the female chapters. By contrast, in *Goon Squad*, I find the circular temporality portrayed in 'Great Rock and Roll Pauses' to be hopeful and regenerative. It fosters deep and loving human relations, and it brings Sasha peace and artistic fulfilment.

In many ways, Egan's novel can be seen as a quintessentially postmodern novel. It does away with plot in any traditional sense, its narrative is scattered and discontinuous and it is highly experimental in form. However, as I have argued, *Goon Squad* transcends postmodernism. There is unity underneath its fragmentation, coherence emerges from its disorder. It conveys multiple temporalities through story and narrative form. By reinventing traditional narrative techniques, Jennifer Egan has written a novel that points to the future of literary art.

Conclusion

In *Passing*, Irene Redfield tries so hard to be in tune with the dominant temporal order. She fills her calendar with lunches, teas and dances, in a repetitive social cycle designed to ensure stability and respectability. Irene wants no divergence from her routine. Her husband's 'noiseless irregularity' and Clare Kendry's furtive 'comings and goings' are disliked because they interrupt Irene's order and structure. Irene is even annoyed at the irregular weather: 'The weather, like people, ought to enter into the spirit of the season' (129). Irene's quest for order is mirrored in the narrative form of the novel. *Passing* is a tightly structured, highly polished meditation on the limited temporal pathways available to black women in 1920s America. As I have argued, time, in *Passing*, is *ordered*.

In this thesis, I have discussed modalities of women's time in Nella Larsen's *Passing* (1929), Joan Didion's *Play It As It Lays* (1970) and Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2011). I have discussed how time is thematised in story and narrative form. Throughout, I have paid particular attention to how the narrative structure underscores the conception of time specific to each novel.

The female characters operate within temporal regimes that place demands on how they order their time in the present and limit what kind of future they can attain – or imagine. I have insisted that the chrononormative demands of society falls disproportionately on women. As my discussion has shown, throughout the twentieth century, women have paid a high price to adhere to reigning temporal norms. Female wants, desires and experiences have been sacrificed or repressed. The specifics of temporal demands and limitations on women have changed over time, but the expectation that marriage and motherhood is the temporal destiny of women remains stubbornly persistent.

The three novels were sourced from distinctive eras of American history and from separate literary periods, and they thematise temporality in strikingly different ways. As I have discussed, Nella Larsen's *Passing* exemplifies the modernist concern with the schism between a public, linear time and a private, non-linear temporality. Larsen explores Irene Redfield's private temporality especially through the narrative technique of recall. Much of *Passing* is narrated as memory. In Joan Didion's *Play It As It Lays*, the dominant temporal mode involves a push to live in the present only, with no reference to past or future. The reduction of time to the present is a characteristically postmodernist concern. Finally, I have

argued that Egan, through her employment of analepses and prolepses, fuses modernist conceptions of the role of recall and memory with postmodernist experiences of the present as instantaneous and as a mode of anticipation. Time, in *Goon Squad*, is fused.

Opportunities for female self-determination has been a particular focus of this thesis. I have argued that in both *Passing* and *Play It*, the female character's potential for self-definition has been severely limited by the patriarchal temporal order. In *Play It*, Maria Wyeth attempts very hard to conform to the reigning temporal regime, just like Irene Redfield in *Passing*. Maria puts all her effort into keeping her mind solely in the 'now.' She does not ask questions, and tries not to look for reasons or explanations. Nothing applies, she repeatedly tells herself. But that is a lie. The past does apply. Maria fails in her attempt to be a 'radical surgeon' of her life. She is unable to cut and excise all painful memories. She cannot escape her nightmares, her guilt or her shame. And, most importantly, she cannot escape her love for her daughter. She cannot forget that she is being denied being a mother, by her husband and the medical establishment. Patriarchal society demands that Maria's timeless and eternal love for an Other, her daughter, be regulated to conform to officially sanctioned timetables and schedules. Maria does her best to live in the present only, as the dominant temporal order demands of her. At the same time, she longs for another time, a time of order, meaning and human connection. In my reading, Maria longs for a time that acknowledges other temporalities than the immediate present. Time, in *Play It*, is denied.

The female characters in *Goon Squad* have greater choice and opportunities to imagine and determine their futures than the women in *Passing* and *Play It*. Crucially, if the female characters in *Goon Squad* fail at the first try, as so many of them do, Egan awards them the chance to reinvent themselves, to imagine another future and try again. However, just as linear time circumscribes cyclical time in the novel, the increased choice for women has limited outcomes. Egan offers few alternatives to the most traditional of female endings: Heterosexual wife and mother. The female characters in *Goon Squad* are expected, and expect of themselves, to traverse the socially sanctioned stages of education, marriage, childrearing, work and saving.

I remain puzzled as to why Egan is so limiting in the futures she imagines for her female characters. None of her characters voluntarily opt out of motherhood or heterosexual relations. None explore alternative sexualities or life trajectories. In a novel which is so firmly invested in multitudes, of experience, of voice, of time, I find the limited temporal destinies implied disappointing. In such a densely populated novel, I think it is a missed opportunity

not to include queer female characters or female characters who refuse the chrononormative expectation of motherhood. In 'Women's Time', Julia Kristeva privileges literature as a place – a space – where 'otherwise repressed, nocturnal, secret, and unconscious' universes can be explored (31). There are still multitudes of modalities of women's time left to explore.

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Appendix: Chapter settings in *A Visit from the Goon Squad*

- Chapter 1, 'Found Objects': Set in 2006. Sasha is 35, and we will later learn that Sasha is born in 1971.
- Chapter 2, 'The Gold Cure': Also set in 2006, but earlier in the year than chapter one because in chapter two, Sasha is still working for Bennie. It is five years after the Twin Towers fell (35), and also five years since Bennie sold his company (24). Bennie is 44, he has a scar on his arm from the "'The Party', a recent debacle' (23) and he has been divorced from Steph a year and a half (27).
- Chapter 3, 'Ask Me if I Care': Charlie is twenty (57). We know from chapter four that she was fifteen in 1973, so the chapter must be set in 1978/79. Later, Jocelyne will say that she met Lou in 1979 (91).
- Chapter 4, 'Safari': This chapter is set in 1973, because the narrative explicitly tells us of something that will happen 'thirty-five years from now, in 2008' (64).
- Chapter 5, 'You (Plural)': Late 1990's. Jocelyne visits Lou on his deathbed, and muses on how twenty years have passed since she saw him last. And we know she met Lou in 1979.
- Chapter 6, 'X's and O's': This chapter, where Scotty goes to see Bennie at his office, is difficult to pinpoint in time. It takes place shortly after Bennie has made his first major deal, and Scotty is divorced from Alice, to whom he was married for four years. I would date this chapter to sometime in the late 1980's.
- Chapter 7, 'A to B': Around 2003. Jules has just been released from prison after serving five years for his attempted rape of Kitty Jackson. Bennie and Steph are still married, Chris is in kindergarten and Bennie sold his 'record label last year' (119).
- Chapter 8, 'Selling the General': Set in 2008, two years after the Party, which we know from chapter two was a recent debacle in 2006.
- Chapter 9, 'Forty-Minute Lunch': 1998. Jules writes this chapter as he is beginning to serve his prison sentence, and we know from chapter seven that he spent five years in jail.
- Chapter 10, 'Out of Body': This chapter is set not long after Bill Clinton's inauguration (197), which was in 1992. We learn that Sasha was 'almost twenty-one' (198) when Rob met her at Freshman Orientation 'last year' (198), which points to her year of birth: 1971.

- Chapter 11, 'Goodbye, My Love': 1990. Sasha has disappeared 'two years ago, at seventeen'. This makes her nineteen in this chapter, and our knowledge of her date of birth gives us the date of the chapter's setting.
- Chapter 12, 'Great Rock and Roll Pauses': Set in '202-' (243).
- Chapter 13, 'Pure language': This chapter is also set in the 2020's, because Lulu, who was nine in 2008, is now in her twenties. It is difficult to pinpoint whether chapter thirteen comes before or after chapter 12, but I will assume it is the last chapter in story time as well as in the narrative.