

I'm Not Who I Think I Am:

Perceptions of Self-Identity and Authenticity in *A Visit from the Goon Squad*

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Throughout life, individuals struggle to understand the one thing with which they have the most critical and intimate relationship: their own personal identity. This elusive and fluid concept is difficult to grasp, but is an essential part of the human experience. The ways in which people view their identities impacts the ways they are able to psychologically function and ultimately the ways they live their lives. Author Jennifer Egan explores the turbulence of the perception of self-identity through time in her novel *A Visit from the Goon Squad*. The characters ponder over the authenticity of their lives and choices, which directly links to the stability of their identities. The more they falsify or deny their true selves, the less genuine they are able to feel. Sasha and Bennie experience the most visible transformations of identity as the novel progresses. It is through these characters particularly that Egan presents the notion that the active struggle for authenticity within identity is a futile effort. Authenticity is actually a matter of perspective and thus *feeling* authentic is only possible through acceptance of one's self.

It is important to explore, first, why authenticity matters. Anthropologist Cornelius Holtorf contemplates that "Maybe the interest in what is authentic, unique, and original is not surprising in a global age of virtual realities and perfect copies, uncertain belonging and increasing 'sameness'" (Holtorf 428). He speaks in the context of object authenticity in archaeology, but the metaphorical implications of this statement reflects vastly on human nature itself. He goes on to incorporate the role of "pastness" in genuineness: "What matters are perceptions of pastness, i.e., the past in an audience's imagination rather than in a chronological system" (Holtorf 432). There is a connection, Holtorf claims, between the perception of pastness and authenticity. This

connection is prevalent in *A Visit from the Goon Squad* in the actions of numerous characters. It is undeniable that the passage of time is an integral theme of the novel, and an obsession with the past appears consistently. Thus, perceiving pastness has a symbol of authenticity would explain such aspects of the novel as Sasha's kleptomania and Bennie's clinging to the music of his youth.

Authenticity in *A Visit from the Goon Squad* is made meaningful by its correspondence with the nature of self-identity. Anthropologist Victor de Munck emphasizes the importance of identity, stating that "the primary function of the "self" is to bestow self-consciousness on an identity. Identities are sites of perspective – each is a self-organizing site of cultural models which provide it with dimensionality (e.g., gesture, emotional stance, logic, speech code, style, etc.)" (de Munck 182). An identity is as essential to human beings as their cognitive abilities themselves. However, psychology plays an enormous factor in the acquisition of identity and the preservation and transformations thereafter. According to literary critic Lois Tyson, "the family...is the most important source of our early emotional experiences...those that affirm our being and those that harm us psychologically...it is in the family that our sense of self and our way of relating to others are first established" (Tyson 83). The sense of self, and consequently the identity, of a person are developed within the family and are thus fragile as they are initially constructed in childhood. Tyson goes on to say that "our sense of self [can be] insecure or unstable if we are unable to sustain a feeling of personal identity...[or] knowing ourselves" making those individuals "very vulnerable to the influence--for good or ill--of other people" (Tyson 84). As will be seen, Sasha's and Bennie's desperate quests for authenticity skew their senses of self and their perceptions of their own identities, causing them to have questionable behavior to which they are unwilling to admit.

As Sasha grapples with her sense of identity and being genuine, it is revealed that she deals with kleptomania. Based on the aforementioned information, it would make sense for her to feel a psychological draw to material objects that she perceives to be authentic due to their pastness. This can be seen in the collection of acquired goods that appear in the first chapter, “Found Objects.” On the tables in her apartment are pens, binoculars, keys, a child’s scarf, and a screwdriver, among other things (15). These pieces are clearly of little material worth, but Sasha feels “pride...in these objects, a tenderness that was only heightened by the shame of their acquisition” (Egan 16). She even goes on to take a piece of paper from Alex’s wallet that “looked very old, the edges torn, the pale blue line rubbed away” (17). It said the words “I BELIEVE IN YOU.” Despite the fact that she felt “embarrassment for Alex, who’d kept this disintegrating tribute in his disintegrating wallet” (17), she could not help but to keep the scrap.

Sasha’s impulse to keep the paper is supported by Holtorf’s theory that “wear and tear, decay, and disintegration are material manifestations of pastness and have long attracted particular appreciation as such” (Holtorf 432). Key words from Holtorf’s list of attributes associated with pastness—tear/torn, disintegration—are used to refer to the paper. Sasha has no reason to value this piece of paper, but its decay indicate that it has a history, a past that was worthy enough of remembrance that Alex kept it in his wallet with him daily. There is something *real* about this note, implying genuine emotion and experience. Sasha is craving this authenticity and therefore steals the paper in an attempt to artificially manifest authenticity in herself.

Sasha is refuses to admit that this subconscious desire exists, however. When she steals the scrap, she tells herself “I’ll put it back later; he probably doesn’t remember it’s in there; I’ll actually be doing him a favor by getting it out of the way” (Egan 18). She does not want this compulsive stealing to be a part of her identity nor does she want to acknowledge the underlying

motivations for these impulses. This denial can be due to a number of reasons. There is the aforementioned search for authenticity and a clinging to the past at play. This is encouraged by the stigma associated with kleptomania and other mental or compulsive disorders. Jennifer Bosson's article "*Concealing To Belong, Revealing To Be Known: Classification Expectations And Self-Threats Among Persons With Concealable Stigmas*" focuses on stigmas on such concepts as homosexuality and ethnicity. Her ideas can be extrapolated to apply to A Visit From the Goon Squad, as well. She writes,

people with concealable stigmas may find themselves 'damned if they do, damned if they don't' when it comes to decisions about revealing their stigmatized identity to others.

Should they reveal, they may experience threats to their social status, relationships, or even physical safety; should they conceal, they cannot be known for themselves, for who they really are. (Bosson 1)

Although Sasha sees a therapist, she conceals her kleptomania and from her boss and people with whom she is intimate. Sasha would potentially be seen as criminal and dysfunctional by society's standards. In an attempt to have others perceive her in the way that she prefers, she attempts to convince even herself that she does not have these impulses, or at least has some control.

Bennie also experiences a stigmatized identity. In the second chapter, "The Gold Cure," he hides his use of gold as solution for his erectile dysfunction. It is clear that he fears the negative affect the impressions that others would have of him should they know of either the dysfunction or his attempts to rectify it. Bennie would potentially be viewed with pity for his inability to properly function sexually. There is a constant mentioning of shame and embarrassment throughout the chapter in various situations, exhibiting Bennie's core psychoanalytic issue of having an insecure, unstable sense of self. As mentioned earlier, Tyson

states that individuals in this state to be “very vulnerable to the influence--for good or ill--of other people” (Tyson 84). When Bennie’s son has lice, he is mortified to the point where remembering “hurt him physically, as if the memory were raking over him and leaving gashes” (Egan 31). An innocent and fairly common occurrence causes Bennie to feel so deeply mortified due to the fact that “other people were staring,” judging him and making negative assumptions about his life.

Although the changes in narrative allow the reader to experience Sasha’s and Bennie’s stories from different points of view, the audience comes to know the characters and their insecurities regardless. The reader is able to see how Bennie and Sasha view themselves based on the ways they appear and are perceived by the others. The order in which the stories are told is also important. The third person focus on Sasha in the first chapter, “Found Objects,” provides a necessary introduction into her life when she is at a low point, still afflicted by kleptomania. The reader learn later, though, that the hardships of Sasha’s life have damaged her perception of her identity. The chapter “Goodbye, My Love,” for instance, reveals from Sasha’s Uncle Ted’s point of view that Sasha witnessed her parents fight at a young age and ultimately left her family (NOTE: Will put in quotes and page numbers later). With a shattered family, Sasha is at a significant disadvantage in terms of discovering self-identity. Tyson states that, “it is in the family that our sense of self and our way of relating to others are first established” (Tyson 83). It is clear that Sasha lacks the stable family background where the foundations of identity searching take place, laying the ground for her future kleptomania, rejection of family, drug abuse, and suicide attempts.

The reader views Bennie’s youthful struggles with identity in the chapter “Ask Me If I Care,” told from the point of view of his childhood friend, Rhea. He has a difficult time knowing

where to belong due to his Latino ethnicity and corresponding, darker skin. He is an integral member of the group of friends in the chapter and the band The Flaming Dildos, but his “otherness” ostracizes him in ways that the rest of his friends cannot understand. He speaks with the other “cholos” on occasion (need page number), but generally rejects his own heritage in order to conform and find a sense of belonging with his group of white friends. In the chapter “A to B,” we see that this is still happening in Bennie’s life when he moves to a high-scale, white-dominated neighborhood (need page numbers). He refuses to be hindered by the stigma of his ethnicity and is perhaps also in denial that the stigma applies to him at all.

Throughout their lives, Sasha and Bennie both search for and crave a feeling of authenticity in their lives. Their perceptions of their identities are so closely linked to their perceptions of others that they are unable to view themselves without making comparisons. This approach to identity negatively affects self-esteem and is a significant factor in the internal struggles that the characters go through. As article “Axis of Criticism Model” proposes, there is a “notion of the looking-glass self” which “posits that self-knowledge is predicated upon society’s attitudes toward individuals...” This causes individuals’ perceptions of their senses of self to be more heavily influenced by the mentality: “I know what I should be because I fall short of it” (Shahar 241). Sasha and Bennie both project personas in the presence of others while they internally feel inadequate or unstable. Sasha “wanted badly to please Coz” and therefore did not reveal all of her thoughts and emotions during therapy. Bennie finds himself overcome with shame while remembering embarrassing moments in public and, when asked if he is alright, replies repeatedly with “I’m sorry,” though he had nothing to apologize for in the present.

Bennie and Sasha experience unique growth in their perceptions of self-identity that are revealed along the way. By the end, both are shown to live happy, comfortable lives with the

new families that they have formed. The key to this transformation is something that these characters adamantly denied themselves until these points: acceptance. Sasha is revealed to be married with two children in the end. While the reader does not get a concluding chapter from Sasha's own perspective, her daughter's powerpoint slides in the chapter "Great Rock and Roll Pauses" offer information about Sasha's perception of identity through the way that she now behaves and treats her family. The rush that Sasha received from stealing and collecting is now channeled into the formation of productive, creative projects. Instead of ignoring the issue, she accepts the underlying urges and desires that motivated her kleptomania and discovers a better way to satisfy them.

We see a similar sense of growth in Bennie. His first marriage fails, but in the end the reader sees Bennie with a new wife. His first spouse had been caucasian, exhibiting Bennie's desire to erase his ethnic identity and to be a part of the established patriarchal society. In the final chapter, "Pure Language," the reader glimpses Bennie's fresh start with this "dark eyed" new wife (Egan 312) that reflects Bennie's acceptance of his heritage. His idea of authenticity had been to blend into the dominating culture, but he found little success in his endeavors to achieve it in this way. Initially, he believed that he had when he received fame and fortune after discovering the band The Conduits. However, when he attempted to assimilated into a rich, white community, he found himself more insecure than ever. By failing to acknowledge his true identity, he perpetuated that insecurity until it destroyed his relationship with his wife, as can be seen in the chapter "A to B." Instead, embracing the dark skin that he was born with

The passage of time can have damaging affects on unstable senses of identities. Bennie's and Sasha's struggles with how to perceive their own identities send them on desperate, but futile, pursuits of authenticity. Their denial projected false and unsatisfying identities in the

meantime, and the quality of their lives and relationships suffered as a result. Neither character could find success while they suppressed their true senses of selves. They had been fooled into thinking that they needed to craft identities based on the demands of culture and society. Instead, they found success and happiness through the acceptance of their true selves, including their insecurities, and only then were they able to achieve authenticity.

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