theories and methodologies

A Feminist Plunge into Sea Knowledge

MARGARET COHEN

AS HER EPIGRAPH TO *MANHATTAN BEACH*, JENNIFER EGAN CHOOSES ONE OF ISHMAEL'S TYPICALLY ABSTRACT MUSINGS IN *MOBY-DICK*: "YES, AS every one knows, meditation and water are wedded for ever." Yet more relevant is his observation in the opening paragraphs of Melville's novel:

> [T]here now is your insular city of the Manhattoes, belted round by wharves as Indian isles by coral reefs—commerce surrounds it with her surf. Right and left, the streets take you waterwards. . . . Circumambulate the city of a dreamy Sabbath afternoon. . . . What do you see?—Posted like silent sentinels all around the town, stand thousands upon thousands of mortal men fixed in ocean reveries. (795)

Throughout the twentieth century and even today, New Yorkers, like many denizens of urban modernity, mostly forget their marine location and look toward the granite, glass, and bright lights of the city. In *Manhattan Beach*, Egan has taken up the form of the sea-adventure novel, which is a point of departure for Melville as well. She uses this form to remind readers that Manhattan, New York City, and—as the novel unfolds—the United States are enmeshed in seafaring networks spanning the globe. The sea-adventure novel was created in the early nineteenth century by the American author James Fenimore Cooper, who melded the historical novel invented by Walter Scott with adventure on the high seas to generate a new literary subgenre that imagined the United States' global oceanic destiny.

Egan sets most of her novel during World War II in the Brooklyn Naval Yard, which today, after decades of decline, is the epicenter of an ambitious urban-renewal project running into the billions of dollars. Egan reminds us of the Naval Yard's historical importance by placing a map of "the world's busiest shipyard during World War II" at the start of the book, even before the epigraph ("World War II Tour"). Readers who need proof of how much care Egan has put into detailing this history can start with the acknowledgments, which follow Egan from the New York Public Library to the Brooklyn Historical Society to oral histories, including those of navy div-

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ers and World War II veteran mariners. Egan has put these acknowledgments at the novel's end, so they will not detract from the emotional truth of her fiction. However, her assurances of historical fidelity and her thanks to the many she consulted continue the tradition of emphasizing the accuracy of technical matters so important to sea fiction from the time Cooper invented the genre. In Cooper's 1849 preface to his first sea novel, *The Pilot: A Tale of the Sea* (1824), celebrating American privateering off the coast of Scotland in service of the American Revolution, he assures readers that he has shown the novel to "an old messmate [William Branford Shubrick, of the US Navy] . . . , now in command on a foreign station . . . , [who] treated the whole matter as fact" and whose "criticisms were strictly professional and perfectly just" (6–7). This technical attention is imperative because sea fiction celebrates what I've elsewhere called the ethos of craft (15), echoing Joseph Conrad's phrase "the honor of labor," from *The Mirror of the Sea* (qtd. in Cohen 148).

The labor depicted in *Manhattan Beach* is helmet diving. The character taking up the career is the tough, fiery protagonist, Anna Kerrigan, a working-class girl who first hears the call of the sea when she visits the novel's eponymous beach in the opening chapter. Before they start the novel, sea-savvy readers may think the title refers to the Southern California town that was such an icon of the laid-back beach lifestyle that the Beach Boys included it in their litany of world-famous surf towns in "Surfin' USA" (Berry and Wilson). However, New York City has a Manhattan Beach as well, in Brooklyn, east of Coney Island, a setting that Egan, with local knowledge and poetic sensibility, uses to condense into two words her novel's propos. At the time the novel's events unfold, during the Depression and World War II, Manhattan Beach was a quiet, residential neighborhood. The beach provides, however, the setting for dramatic, life-altering encounters throughout the novel. As a preteen girl, Anna accompanies her father, Eddie Kerrigan, to the beach while he talks business with his boss, the wealthy, sharp-dressing gangster Dexter Styles, who lives in "the last house on the street, which dead-end[s] at the sea" (3). Walking along the cold, late-December shore as her father attends to his murky business, Anna turns to the water and feels at "its edge . . . an electric mix of attraction and dread" that will launch her on her life's path (6).

Explaining this mix of emotions, the narrator has Anna wonder about the mysteries of the ocean's depths:

> What would be exposed if all that water should suddenly vanish? A landscape of lost objects: sunken ships, hidden treasure, gold and gems and the charm bracelet that had fallen from her wrist into a storm drain. *Dead bodies*, her father always added, with a laugh. To him, the ocean was a wasteland. (6)

In this passage, Egan alludes to Ariel's song, in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, about the mysterious "*sea change* / *Into something rich and strange*" suffered by Ferdinand's father, who drowned in a shipwreck (1.2.478–79), as well as to T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, whose musing on the exhaustion of Western civilization in the aftermath of World War I contains its own allusion to Ariel's song ("Those are pearls that were his eyes" [136]). The scene's language also echoes two poems by American women that bookend the years in which *Manhattan Beach* is set. The poets, Marianne Moore and Elizabeth Bishop, share a fascination for the sea's symbolic depths and assert their claim to sea knowledge, historically a masculine domain. Moore's "A Grave," first published in 1921 (as "Graveyard"), declares that "the sea has nothing to give but a well excavated grave" (49). And when Anna "unroll[s] her wool stockings and place[s] her white, bony, long-for-her-age feet in the icy water," feeling "a flame of ache" (7), we hear Bishop, in "At the Fishhouses" (1948):

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> If you should dip your hand in,
> your wrist would ache immediately,
> your bones would begin to ache and your hand would burn
> as if the water were a transmutation of fire
> that feeds on stones and burns with a dark gray flame. (52)

However, Egan's poetically minded narrator notwithstanding, Anna rejects a literary relation to the sea. Rather, she is a protagonist of action, in the long tradition of heroes of the sea, from their mythic beginnings with figures such as Odysseus, even if Anna is, quite exceptionally, a heroine. She is not content, like the ocean dreamers of Melville, to gaze out at the ocean but feels, in the words of Conrad in *Lord Jim*, the pull "in the destructive element [to] immerse" (126). While the narrator waxes eloquent, the protagonist uses terse, plain language. What does it feel like, she is asked after she puts her foot in the water? "Cold. . . . Awful, awful cold" (7). In Egan's handling, the sea is a heavily laden terrain for cultural mythology—her narrator can expand on this topic with Ishmael-like flourishes—yet also a physical place of work. World War II famously enabled women to enter the manufacturing industries from which they were normally barred. While Rosie the Riveter wielded power tools, Egan found for her heroine an occupation vastly more inhospitable to women than the assembly line: hard-hat diving to repair damaged battleships. The terrible war has come to her, as to a number of women, almost frighteningly as a gift, giving her a job that allows her to find her way in the harsh milieu of working-class life during the Depression and its aftermath. Anna's need to work is all the more urgent because her father mysteriously disappears early on in the novel, leaving her alone with her mother and her severely ill sister, whose care consumes all her mother's time.

With engrossing technical detail, one plotline of *Manhattan Beach* follows Anna's initiation into and mastery of the craft of modern helmet diving. Since the first decades of the nineteenth century, helmet diving has been an essential technique for both ship repair and maritime salvage. Jules Verne may have given Nemo and his crew helmet-diving suits with self-contained breathing apparatuses in *Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea* (1870), but fictions centering on helmet diving—and certainly fictions for adult readers—are sparse. Sea-adventure novels centered on helmet diving started to appear in 1876, with the publication of R. M. Ballantyne's *Under the Waves; or, Diving in Deep Waters*. They became more common in the twentieth century, often written for young adults. Egan is, to my knowledge, the first novelist to give gravitas to this line of work and use it to address momentous historical events, as well as the first to take as protagonist a female character in a profession unpracticed by women.

Perhaps Egan enjoys displaying a hallmark of female novelists when she offers an extremely detailed description of dive dress, as she first initiates Anna into the exclusively masculine profession of the helmet diver. Her description of this garb's immense weight—the suit, helmet, and boots together are over two hundred pounds—explains one of the factors barring women from this profession. From the time Anna first is imprisoned in this dress to the heckling of skeptical men, Egan evokes with textured detail the methods of a branch of work known, I would venture, to few readers. We can all imagine the bubble helmets worn by these divers, but who knew that the cushion preventing the sharp edges of the diver's metal breastplate from digging into the skin was called the "pussy cushion"? Or that the garb includes a crotch strap to secure the harness (143), a positioning that Anna may experience as humiliating?

As is common in sea fiction, *Manhattan Beach* transmits technical knowledge by structuring it as a series of problems and solutions—in this case, starting with Anna's initi-

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ation into helmet diving and ending with the novel's climatic dive. We learn about the work of the diver by imaginatively accompanying Anna on tests that evaluate her suitability for the job, as she proves her dexterity by untying a bowline knot while weighted down with her diving suit on land or enters a recompression chamber to experience the pressure she will feel in the depths. On Anna's first test dive, the reader confronts the alternate physics of the underwater atmosphere, when the "pain of the dress" turns to elation, as Anna's sense of its weight vanishes in the heavy aquatic atmosphere (216). Then, Anna struggles to complete her task of nailing five pieces of wood together into a box while the pieces threaten to float away. The opacity of the underwater environment turns menacing when Anna loses track of the line that leads back to the surface, even as this loss reflects her reluctance to leave an intoxicating atmosphere. Ignoring the guidance of the topside team, she improvises her own means of surfacing by inflating her diving dress, a maneuver that shows her intuition, since this practice is generally known only to more experienced divers.

Anna's process of going it on her own, making a mistake, and improvising a solution exhibiting her craft repeats itself across her dives—and across her life. In her dive improvisations, Anna transgresses basic protocols of dive safety and incurs the wrath of her superiors. Her deviations in her life from the models of proper femininity are equally risky, dangerous, and enriching: nice women don't make history or venture where no woman has gone before.

While Anna is a civilian diver, Egan thanks in her acknowledgments Andrea Motley Crabtree, the "first female U.S. Army deep-sea diver," for helping her understand the challenges women faced in this line of work (436). What Egan does not mention is that Crabtree did not break the gender barrier until 1982, forty years after the events of the novel. The Web site of the United States Naval Undersea Museum features biographies of other early female divers, emphasizing that in the navy no women became helmet divers until the late 1970s or 1980s ("Women Divers"). Every so often sea fiction has introduced into the masculine fraternity of seamen a woman whose presence there is implausible, without historical precedent—in the American tradition, for example, the eponymous heroine of *Fanny Campbell, the Female Pirate Captain: A Tale of the Revolution* (1844), by Maturin Murray Ballou. A prolific popular author, Ballou created Fanny Campbell for commercial reasons—as an unexpected variation of the popular genre invented by Cooper twenty years earlier. Ballou justified the heroine's piquant cross-dressing with a formulaic motivator: her quest to free her captive beloved. Given the ambitious historical realism of Egan's novel, her heroine's career choice stands out as an isolated romance element that demands explanation.

Anna's lack of a historical model indicates for me a challenge Egan faces in unifying different themes of her novel that do not always sit easily together. The heavy gear of helmet diving disguises Anna's female body and lets Egan create a heroine who makes her way on her own, freed from feminine stereotypes, seeking a career open to talents, as is the due of male heroes in sea-adventure fiction. The technical details of diving enable the novelist to reclaim the depths from their long-standing metaphoric status as mythical underworld. At the same time, poetic echoes do shape Anna's choice of career: Adrienne Rich made famous the image of a female diver using modern dive technology to plunge into the depths to find the wreckage of history in "Diving into the Wreck" (1973). Rich's poem, however, depicts not helmet diving but scuba diving, which requires much lighter equipment. Scuba vastly expanded access to the undersea after World War II for everyone, including women, even as topside sexism carried down into underwater exploration, work, and leisure.

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Above all, Anna's career as diver fulfills a need at the intersection of myth and narrative: the technical knowledge that allows Anna to search for her lost father, who before he vanished worked in the New York underworld, fabled for disappearing people into the city's waterways. Anna may declare that, when she passes her diving tests and proves her equality with the male divers, "a moving picture would have ended there" (289). Still more cinematic is the second plotline threading through the novel since the inaugural scene on Manhattan Beach—the rise and fall of the charismatic criminal Dexter Styles. The New York waterfront, after all, is most commonly associated in the imagination of today's readers not with maritime salvage and repair but rather with the mob, in part thanks to cinema, most famously Elia Kazan's *On The Waterfront* (1954), starring Marlon Brando. Anna comes to suspect that she has lost her father because he too is among the "dead bodies" beneath the waves, interred by a man whose house "dead-ended" at the beach. Anna and Dexter Styles reconnect unexpectedly at his nightclub and through what melodrama would call "the voice of blood"—in this case, not consanguinity but rather the blood of her father, which Styles has on his hands. The encounter turns to (perhaps mutual) seduction and then reveals, to this reader at least, the driving narrative need for Anna to become a helmet diver: the ability in the ultimate diving scene to go underwater to find if "[f]ull fathom five" her "father lies" (Shakespeare 1.2.474).

In this dive, Anna goes completely AWOL from dive protocol, sneaking a suit from the navy and diving under the cover of night in an unfamiliar location. The dive occurs off the shores of Staten Island, treacherous water where the vast Atlantic sweeps into the harbors of New York. In this climactic scene, Anna must call on all her training—and thereby Egan continues to draw suspense from the technical details of the craft, from the moment Anna descends into the intense current, "the water push[ing] at her back, pressing her against the descending line rather than separating her from it" (325). Styles, watching nervously from the surface, asks Anna's tender about the trail of bubbles rising from below. Even after learning that it signals her location and her safety, Styles feels a compulsion to follow her and share her fatal knowledge. Revealing the gangster's fist under the faux-gentleman's glove, Dexter uses the threat of violence to persuade the trained seamen to let him dive despite his total lack of experience. In this episode, the novel throws all plausibility out the window for symbolic impact. On the seabed, Dexter and Anna have a last, tense encounter, searching for her father's body. Anna digs in the sand and unleashes a phosphorescent shower: "metallic orange, purple, green" that "rose from the newly exposed earth and shimmered in the water around her" (337). Following this eerie illumination, Anna finds her father's watch, feeling the initials engraved on it through the thickness of her diving gloves.

Her father's watch—but not his body. Anna's memories of him stopped at the time of his disappearance from her life, but the narrator has already recovered for the reader Eddie, also freed by the sea, a member of the merchant marine traveling the globe. In the wake of this reckoning off Staten Island, Dexter is murdered by a mob rival, the price he has paid for tying his fortunes to the New York underworld, as well as for betraying his wife with Anna. As Dexter dies, he reveals in a flashback the circumstances of her father's murder, and then the narrator continues with details of Eddie's Houdini-like escape underwater from almost certain death. When Anna realizes she is pregnant after a night with Styles, and that her father is alive, she quits her job in the Brooklyn Naval Yard and heads west, the direction that United States imperial mythology has long associated with infinitely renewable natural resources and opportunities for self-(re-)creation. The novel ends in San Francisco,

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with a remade family of tough but loving survivors: Anna, her child Leon, her father, and Eddie's hapless yet caring sister, Brianne.

Despite the novel's happy ending, Egan swerves away from the sublime sunset, which would typically close a narrative of westward renewal, although it would have been magnificent viewed from the hills of San Francisco, where the sky glows with orange, pink, and violet as the sun slips into the Pacific Ocean. Instead, Anna and her father watch the fog roll in: "a wild, volatile silhouette against the phosphorescent sky . . . like a tidal wave about to break, or the aftermath of a silent, distant explosion" (432). Even as the explosion evokes the annihilation of the atom bomb that the United States would drop across the ocean, the tidal wave evokes natural seismic upheaval. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the reference to a tidal wave reminds us of recent tsunamis, and, beyond that, of coastal flooding and other violent weather of the planet intensifying because of climate change. Thus, the imagery at the novel's close returns us to the setting of the opening scene, as it looks today: if Manhattan Beach is now known at all beyond its neighborhood, it is perhaps because its sand and structures were swept away in Superstorm Sandy, as shown in photos of the beach taken after the storm ("Hurricane Sandy").

The age of the Anthropocene is in the offing as Anna and Eddie watch the fog roll into San Francisco Bay. Egan not only recalls New York's maritime past and its commercial present but also turns readers seaward to remind us that cities are not isolated from their environment but interface with it. New York may not, like San Francisco, be subject to seismic unrest, but the surge of Sandy flooded the subways and generators of what Melville's Ishmael uncannily called a city "belted round by wharves as Indian isles by coral reefs." Climate change not only bleaches the stunning life-forms of corals but also creates rising sea levels and beach erosion, threatening the deceptively "insular city" (Ishmael's pun) like other hubs of our global modernity.

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