

Representing Vulnerabilities in Contemporary Literature

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Chapter 4

Pretty Dolls Don't Play Dice

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4 Pretty Dolls Don't Play Dice

The Calculated Vulnerabilities of Jennifer Egan's *Manhattan Beach* (2017)

Miriam Fernández-Santiago

Introduction

Two years before the publication of *Manhattan Beach*, and fully aware of how unwise it was to “speak of the ‘career’ of a writer so evidently in full-flow as Jennifer Egan,” Martin Paul Eve (2015) risked identifying certain trends “over the arc of her writing since 1995” (2). These included “the emergence of new technologies and the way in which they shape our concepts of (re)mediation or in Egan’s seemingly broader interest in the place of affect in experimental fiction,” which Eve locates within the wider frame of “postmodern fiction” (2). At that time, Egan had been working on *Manhattan Beach* for about 13 years (Egan 2017a), which means that the novel was conceived in the aftermath of 9/11. Shortly after its release in 2017, Egan explained how when writing a historical novel set in New York during World War II, she somehow meant to connect with 9/11, which she “felt was the end of something, or at least an important event in a trajectory that had begun with the rise of America as a superpower at the end of world war two” (2017b). Significantly, while Egan described 9/11 as the end of something, she also did it in terms of her writing style in *Manhattan Beach*: “I [...] admitted to myself I was sick of all that so-called innovation, and that it would be a relief to get rid of it [because e]verything else is gimmickry” (2017b). In this comment, Egan seems to imply that the end of America’s 20th-century imperial period signaled by 9/11 also signified an end to its corresponding postmodernist aesthetics, which she mercilessly deflates as “gimmickry.”

This end was already envisioned by David Foster Wallace (1993) as the advent of post-postmodernism, where he defined post-postmodernist writers as:

the next real literary ‘rebels’ [...] who dare go back away from ironic watching, who have the childish gall to actually endorse single-entendre values. Who treat old untrendy human troubles and emotions is U.S. life with reverence and conviction [...] Too sincere. Clearly repressed. Backward, quaint, naïve, anachronistic [...] the ones

willing to risk the yawn, the rolled eyes [...] Accusations of sentimentality, melodrama. Credulity.

(192–193)

The new direction in Egan's full-flow career proved Eve's assessment to be a risky one only two years after he made it. But the risk was also Egan's. In the same 2017 interview where Egan chanced disowning post-modernist experimentalism, Rachel Cooke directly asked her if the forward-moving plot, old-fashioned heroine, and verisimilitude of "[a] Victorian novel by any other name [...] might be interesting after all" (Egan 2017b). In 2017, Egan simply laughed at the question, or so Cooke reported. Two years later, the *PMLA* March issue dedicated the eight original articles of its section on "Theories and Methodologies" entirely to *Manhattan Beach*. Interestingly enough, the section also included Egan's interloping reaction to them.

Despite Egan's open disavowal of experimentalism in *Manhattan Beach*, many of the scholars contributing to the *PMLA* 2019 March issue describe the novel as experimental. George Hutchinson (2019) claims that *Manhattan Beach* is an experiment in historical fiction, while Rachel Adams (2019) and Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (2019) argue that Egan's is an experiment in sentimental fiction that Janet Lyon (2019) assimilates to melodrama. To Margaret Cohen (2019), Egan is experimenting with a feminist approach to the masculine domain of the sea-adventure novel, but to John Fabian Witt (2019), the novel experiments with the possibilities of inarticulate language. Throughout this apparent disparity in approach, all of them agree that what Egan does in *Manhattan Beach* is unexpectedly traditional and the only way they have to explain it is by means of historicist experimentalism, be it in language, setting, themes, plot, or character construction. But the criticism was not always positive. Although Cohen (2019), Hutchinson (2019), and Witt (2019) praise Egan's extensive research in bringing the literary and historical ethos of the American 1940s alive in her novel, her recourse to sentimentality at the expense of traditional representations of femininity and disability raised the criticism of Adams (2019), Lyon (2019), and Garland-Thomson (2019), ranging varying degrees of not always veiled acidity. While Adams (2019) merely states that Egan's deployment of sentiment depicts disability "in the terms established by the sentimental tradition" (369), Garland-Thomson (2019) qualifies her representation of disabled women in the novel as a "predictable and stereotypical" (380) instance of "the classic sentimentalism of angelic invalidism" (383). Lyon (2019) directly describes the plot as "shopworn" and "cliché" (405). In this case, Egan's (2019) reaction was less dismissive and perhaps not even ironic in saying she "was better off knowing it," though she could not say she enjoyed their criticism (417). Critics, she (humbly?) says, reveal to her facets of her work she "hadn't consciously recognized" (417).

Only a month after Cooke rhetorically asked Egan if the verisimilitude of *Manhattan Beach* was “interesting after all” (2017b), Liz von Klemperer and T.A. Stanley (2017) agreed it was not. In this case, the reason was stated in more clearly moral and ethical terms: despite the novel takes on gender, race, and disability, its characters do not provide positive models for identity-based activism. According to them, this makes the novel clichéd, disappointing, depressing, forced and creepy, uninteresting, and off-putting. Also, in (purely?) aesthetic terms, the novel did not give them what both of them *wanted*, which, in their own words, was to be surprised, to be left wondering at the end. To Hutchinson (2019), these alleged flaws “[pertain] to the novel’s relation to fiction of the 1940s” (392), which however, Stanley (von Klemperer and Stanley 2017) confesses, “saturates” her. Alexandra Schwartz’s interview to Egan (2017a) on account of *Manhattan Beach*, in October, is less centered on the novel than on Egan’s personal biography and character, exposing not only fandom anecdotes about her past but also extremely painful life experiences that contribute to Egan’s honesty in depicting disability, such as her brother’s schizophrenia and her survival guilt after his suicide, which occurred as Egan was working on the final draft of the novel. Such is also the case of her father’s Catholicism and his absence from her life, the fact that she spent part of her life in California and New York (the novel’s settings), or her experience as a working mother. But the novel was initially inspired, Egan acknowledges, by her experience of 9/11 (Egan 2017a). “In a decade when the idea of making America great again seems supercharged by notions of America when it *was* supposedly great,” Hutchinson (2019) agrees, “we can use some diving into the wreck” (391).

The wreck caused by 9/11 also inspired Judith Butler (2004) to write *Precarious Life: The Power of Mourning and Violence* as a “response to the conditions of heightened vulnerability and aggression that followed from those events” (xi). Butler regretted that the “unbearable vulnerability” (xi) suffered by the USA in the 9/11 attacks should be met with nationalist political action aiming retribution rather than international solidarity while she puts vulnerability forward as an intrinsically human quality. Public grievability for human precarity, she concludes, determines who is human, and, therefore, visualizing the faces of those who suffer and embracing our “uninhabitable identification” (xix) with them prevent the foreclosure of critique (xx). “The public sphere is constituted in part by what can appear, and the regulation of the sphere of appearance is one way to establish what will count as reality, and what will not” (xx) she argues, as she sadly misses specifying the form that the visual and textual materiality of public appearance should take.

In “Narrative Prosthesis and the Materiality of the Metaphor,” David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder (2000) argue that “disability pervades literary narrative [...] as an opportunistic metaphorical device” (47) that

“binds disabled characters to a programmatic (even deterministic) identity” as powerful “counterpoints to their respective cultures’ normalizing Truths about the construction of deviance in particular” (50). They call attention to the fact that despite the pervasive presence of disabled images in national literatures, “we screen so many images of disability and simultaneously screen them out of our minds” (51). Mitchell and Snyder explain that this is so because “we rarely connect together stories of people with disabilities as evidence of a wider systemic predicament,” adding that “[t]his same phenomenon can be applied to other representational discourses” (51). Although in 2000, Mitchell and Snyder did not extend the implications of their analysis of disabled alterity as a specific form of human vulnerability, their analysis of *narrative prosthesis* can certainly serve as a warning against Butler’s views on the visualization of human precarity. Following their argumentative thread, visibilizing human vulnerability in the public sphere of literature and the arts might not only instrumentalize grievability to advance narrative strength but also widen the gap preventing identification with forms of alterity that are represented as uninhabitably extreme.

This idea is certainly behind Garland-Thomson (2019), Adams (2019), and Lyon’s (2019) approach to the novel from the critical perspective of disability studies as they attribute the novel’s strength to the narrative powers of disability: Egan’s narrative is strong because it is prosthetically enhanced. However, despite its alleged narrative strength, the novel is extremely vulnerable to critical attack as it fails to meet the ethical and formal expectations and demands of a critically trained readership. As Egan’s penetrating eyes look at you from her modeling-trained author pose—but, mostly, after her reflection on the self-conscious exposure of one’s public image in *Look at Me* (2001)—one cannot but wonder whether publicly exposing the way in which extremely painful events of her private life find a correspondence in her novel (and doing this during an interview that was part of the novel’s promotional activities) might not reveal the novel’s vulnerability to criticism to be a calculated risk.

If the novel’s settings, themes, and form are meant to connect with the aftermath of 9/11 as Egan herself acknowledges, would it not include considering the extratextual, interdiscursive effect that her “experiment” would have on her 2017 readership? In this chapter, I would like to explore the possibility that Egan calculated this response as a mechanism to make readers embrace their critical “uninhabitable identification” (Butler 2004, xix) with the radical vulnerability of her characters by simultaneously engaging their sentimental response as well as their critical detachment from the calculated vulnerability of her text. If this were so, Egan would be preventing the foreclosure of critique (Butler 2004, xx) of identity-related themes and formal experimentalism that post-structuralist criticism and postmodernist narrative might have already exploited to exhaustion.

Human Vulnerability as Narrative Prosthesis

There is no denying that Adams (2019), Lyon (2019), and Garland-Thomson (2019) are right in finding that *Manhattan Beach* heavily relies on narrative prosthesis for a sentimental effect. It is obvious that the extreme disability of Lydia's character establishes the conflict that sets action into motion and contributes to depict characters depending on how they relate or react to her. She cannot walk, talk, or have sex; she has to be fed, washed, and dressed. The novel even leaves some room for ambiguity about her ability to feel or think. On top of that, she is a religious minority, an extremely poor immigrant female, and an abandoned child. If this was not enough to engage readers in sentimental appreciation of disability, she is also extremely beautiful, which only makes her disability the more regrettable (Garland-Thomson 2019, 379).

As Mitchell and Snyder (2000) underline when describing the device of narrative prosthesis (56, 61), Lydia's disability could be regarded as the void that inaugurates Egan's narrative, but her disability is of no utter consequence for the development of the novel once her difference from normalcy is established. It could be argued that once Lydia helps in determining a cause for Eddie Carrigan to abandon his family, for Anna to become closer to Dexter Styles so he could ride Lydia to Manhattan Beach, and to prevent her abortion through a vision of a healthy Lydia; once Lydia's inarticulate language gives the sea an obscure symbolism that grants structural unity to the novel (Witt 2019), she is erased from the story together with her bodily difference.

In terms of narrative strength, Lydia's disability may function not only as the main motor and fuel of plot development and arrangement but also as the main differential reference for character depiction. Although the 1929 crash triggers the Carrigans' economic downfall in the show business and exposes them to economic vulnerability, it is the economic and social burden of Lydia's disability what determine the family hierarchies and duties that define each of the Kerrigans. The economic burden she becomes for the family imprisons her father in precarious working conditions controlled by the Mick syndicate while her mother's beauty and dancing skills wane as her sole occupation becomes taking care of Lydia's bodily needs. Also, her sister Anna needs to grow into a sharper, stronger, kinder, and more masculine version of the girl she could have been had Lydia's disability not claimed the dumber, weaker, more demanding, and feminine family role for herself. It is not just that the Kerrigan's identities in the novel are defined by (against) Lydia's disability (as provider, caretaker, and doppelganger respectively); she also becomes the focus of family attention, purpose, and conversation as well as affection. Caring for Lydia is what glues them together and gives them identity and purpose as a family.

But the Kerrigans' surrogate disability also surfaces gender vulnerabilities connected to their individual family roles. In order to provide for her

sister, Anna needs to engage in a typically masculine (more dangerous) job as a diver, or to instrumentalize her sexuality so as to obtain Dexter Styles' attentions and funding for medical care. Agnes Kerrigan's family role as wife and lover is negatively affected by her duties as Lydia's full-time mother and caretaker, which she always puts in the first place. Finally, Lydia's disability emasculates Eddie Kerrigan as a failed family provider, while his surrogate physical and intellectual vulnerability pushes him down in the novel's ableist male hierarchy. Lydia's disability is weaponized against her father by Mick union headman and racketeer Dunellen, who withholds Eddie's pay as a bagman to heighten his economic dependence on him. It is Lydia's need for an extremely expensive chair what also puts Eddie under the service of Wop gambling businessman Dexter Styles. In both cases, progeny ableness is put forward as both a sign and a condition of the masculine status that matches economic success. Because "[m]en's children gave them away" (2017c, 9), Eddie wondered if rich men like Styles "did [...] *have* children such as Lydia" (17), whose disability "suggested some gross misstep of his own" (267; emphasis in the original).

As contended by Mitchell and Snyder (2000) in their argument on narrative prosthesis, in Egan's novel, Lydia's mental and physical collapse operates as a metaphorical device that serves as the signifier of a wider, social collapse (47), although in this case, Egan's metaphor also serves as evidence of a broader systemic predicament. In the story, this social collapse is depicted through its intersection with other forms of socially vulnerable communities (ethnic, religious, or gendered minorities) and explained as the result of the USA's economic vulnerability in the aftermath of the 1929 crash as well as the vulnerability of its borders and peoples in the context of World War II. These vulnerabilities stand against the ableist normative standard regulating the American sociopolitical and socioeconomic Dream (Dolmage 2017) culminating in the US imperial dominance over the second half of the 20th century. Against the historical context of its composition, not only Lydia's many disabilities but the country's many vulnerabilities depicted in Egan's historical novel operate as the analeptic metaphorical signifier of the "unbearable vulnerability" (Butler 2004, xi) that the 9/11 attacks exposed at the core of the American Imperial Dream.

In the novel, Lydia's disability and her family's surrogate disability, as well as the systemic vulnerability of the American 1940s call for "[t]he very need for a story" that narrates the "something [that went] amiss" (Mitchell and Snyder 2000, 53) in 2001 America. In this sense, the novel's exploitation of Lydia's disability as narrative prosthesis could be considered opportunistic if the materiality of her body and mind as a metaphor for national systemic failure might left disability unaddressed once it performed its narrative function. However, its very material intersections with the social, economic, and political conditions that

contextualize the experience of disability also help in exploring the ideological, discursive, and historical origins of the structural oppressions that disable individuals, along with individual vulnerability as a shared national experience.

It might be the case that the spectacularization of Lydia's disability—which I will discuss below—has obscured the relevance of gambling as another central theme in the novel. Gambling intersects with disability through the character of Eddie Kerrigan, who interprets his daughter's severe impairment as a fatidic occurrence in the game of life. Because, unlike the rest of children in the protectory where he grew up, Eddie would not cheat, old "sporting man" DeVeer taught him how to play cards straight, identifying "loaded dice, crooked decks, signs of collusion between apparent strangers" was a way to win a game, but mostly to prevent "anything that undermined the mystical activity of Lady Luck" (2017c, 39). In Eddie's view, the favor of "Lady Luck" is a sign of American exceptionalism, as well as a social leveler that stands for a sort of justice beyond human justice. He wonders at Captain Kittredge's having "much luck, he'd luck to spare" (301). Eddie qualifies this good luck as the "American" luck he reached for all his life as he regretted that "[p]erhaps having luck meant you didn't have to reach" (306).

Most characters in the novel connect this idea of luck to a physical normative standard including innate beauty and health as well as economic prosperity. Captain Kittredge is lucky because of his "fair hair and fine patrician hands" (Egan 2017c, 301), while Eddie and Styles are lucky because they have beautiful wives (273). According to this assumption, Lydia's inborn disability is akin to a curse. To Eddie, however, bad luck can be turned if the game is straight and you know how to play it. While working as a bagman for Dunellen's rigged gambling only sank him deeper into servitude and misery, his employment as an "ombudsman" for Styles' casinos would not only grant "men an honest audience with Lady Luck," but, most importantly, it would "save" Eddie by offering Lydia an opportunity to "begin to right herself" (274).

The intersection between luck and economic prosperity is established in the novel through the stock market. At the peak of his success in the show business, Eddie studied to be a stockbroker, where he "found his perfect game of chance" (Egan 2017c, 41). Lydia's birth, however, signaled a turning point in Eddie's fortune that foreshadowed the 1929 crash. Along the novel, the idea that good fortune and economic success turns people weak is suggested by Eddie's story and by Styles' pressing concern that growing rich would turn his children soft (18). Still, the function of luck as a fair social leveler is constantly threatened in the story by the pervasiveness of rigged game, which stands as a metaphorical device for social injustice. Eddie's skills in gambling make him aware that good fortune in the form of economic success is not always a matter of luck, but mostly of obscure contrivance.

The rigged games of chance near Dunellen's piers enervate Eddie even more than the structural corruption of the system, which included union leaders, politicians, and loan brokers:

Eddie's shock at this discovery attested to an idealism he hadn't realized he still possessed. A man who borrowed from a loan shark knew what he was getting into [...]. But a man who elected to try his luck in hopes of bringing something home to his wife deserved a chance at winning. Luck was the single thing that could rearrange facts [...] a crooked game was worse than unfair; it was cosmic violation.

(Egan 2017c, 269)

At a higher level, it is the "rarefied connections" (2017c, 91) between the privileged with puritan forebears and the Italian mafia, together with the "machinations of the bankers," what "lofted [them] above the better part of human experience" (86) and rigged the game of "all human achievement—be it the Roman conquests or American Independence" (91).

In Egan's novel, however, although the use of Lydia's disability can certainly be considered opportunistic in narrative terms, the connection between her disability and a systemic failure in the American 1940s is clear. The pervasiveness of the game motif throughout the novel allows Egan to put luck forward as a metaphor for equal opportunities that are denied to Lydia as a disabled character, as well as to other forms of social vulnerability based on differential othering. Rigged game is the origin of the intersecting social injustices that oppress the many disempowered communities visibilized in the story—such as the working class, women, or ethnic and racial minorities—deviating from the normative standard of an American Dream allegedly based on equal opportunities in the pursuit of happiness.

This metaphor is literalized when Eddie imagines the pursuit of fair game as the economic opportunity that would allow Lydia to "right herself" by sitting straight on a chair. Rigged game and social injustice are also brought together under comparative terms by having the same character—Dunnellen—fix gambling, control labor distribution, and take a cut from the loan shark's profits at the docks, all of which prevent men from providing for their families. Ableist assumptions also underlie labor segregation in the docks, where women are denied the opportunity to join the diving repair team because of their weaker physique. These assumptions are questioned when Anna proves herself capable of undertaking the task and by comparing her alienation from her male co-workers to the only colored man's in the team.

Conversely, unequal opportunities favored by social injustice are identified as the direct cause of weakness in the lucky wealthy. It is growing rich what turns the Berringers soft (implying lack of intellectual sharpness), by perpetuating their privilege on the basis of congenial breeding

(Egan 2017c, 87) since their “Puritan forebears” (82). Also, the privileged life that Styles provided for his children makes him envy the resilience and boldness of Kerrigan’s healthy daughter in comparison with his own (9). Finally, Styles fears that feeling sorry for the uninhabitable economic vulnerability of his employees might transpire as his own emotional “weakness” (100–101, 139) establishing a correlation between economic and emotional vulnerability that runs contrary to social cohesion.

Thus, not only disability but any form of social vulnerability stands in the novel as the social “abnormalit[ies] from which all [normative and] nonnormative groups must be distanced” (Mitchell and Snyder 1997, 6). Instead of fostering social cohesion based on a shared or surrogate vulnerability (Butler 2004), the different embodiments through which vulnerability in the USA is visualized in the novel turn different vulnerable collectives and individuals against each other. This is instanced in the open war between the Irish and the Italians for the control of the illegal business in the docks. Although they are similarly oppressed by the harsh economic conditions and social injustice firstly triggered by the 1929 crash and later furthered by the World War II blockade, these ethnic groups turn against each other by putting the blame of their common vulnerabilities on individual groups rather than the system. As their corpses are washed away by the Hudson River, they become, however, indistinguishable from each other, like “the scores of faces interchangeable as pennies” (Egan 2017c, 35) that they were at the New York Catholic Protectory some years earlier:

Never mind that those killed had all been killers. Never mind that the Syndicate was not all wops, or that Dunellen’s personal enemies were, to a man, fellow micks: rival pier bosses, rogue hiring bosses, union holdouts—any one of whom might vanish, courtesy of Dunellen’s loogans, until the spring thaw sent their bloated bodies wafting to the surface of the Hudson River like parade floats.

(30–31)

After the narrator gives a detailed description of Lydia’s many ailments that is focalized through Eddie, he reflects upon the surrogate disability of his family in terms of justice, showing his social idealism and his ableism to be two sides of the same coin: “Things were not as they should be—not remotely. He was a law-and-order man (Eddie often reminded himself ironically), and too many laws had been broken here” (Egan 2017c, 16), he concludes, referring to Lydia’s disability in a sort of cosmic connection with systemic collapse. To separate himself from the social and individual abnormalities he is such an integral part of (his participation in Dunnellen’s illegal businesses and his daughter’s disability), Eddie visualizes himself as an external observer, rather than a participant: “Eddie knew he was sluicing the corruption by delivering the boodling payoffs that sustained it

[...]. Yet he maintained an observational stance—he wasn't really doing what he was doing, he was watching it" (270). Similarly, his emotional disengagement from the social embarrassment that Lydia's cries cause in church allow him even to attempt to kill his daughter in seeking "relief from his despair [...]. The curious detachment Eddie had felt at Mass returned [...]. He was an observer, no more, watching a man lift a pillow and set it lightly upon the face of his sleeping daughter" (268).

Although in Egan's novel Lydia stands as the symbolic visible embodiment of America's vulnerability as a nation, it is not Lydia's disability, but the US systemic collapse culminating in the 9/11 attacks—of which Lydia's disability is one, though salient, instance—what runs the novel's narrative engine. With a game so blatantly rigging the socioeconomic justice of the USA's imperial period, "[s]ometimes the best you can do," Egan argues, "is buy time" (Egan 2017c, 31). Time is certainly of essence in Egan's novel, and especially, in close connection with luck since old De Veer, who taught child Eddie how to play fair game, gave him his watch as a last present. In *Manhattan Beach*, the retrospective superposition of the two decisive historical moments that frame the rise and fall of the USA's invulnerability as a world power, weaves a causative narrative thread that looks to the past as well as to the future of the country with as much hope as despair on the shared responsibility of ombudsmanship in the face of national vulnerability. Playing a fair game also seems to be behind Egan's time-traveling commitment with the historical novel in *Manhattan Beach*. When she explains her turn to "verisimilitude and the linear" in literary style to Cooke, Egan (2017b) declares that using "leaps into the future" in order to narrate a connection between World War II America and 9/11 seemed postmodern "gimmickry" to her because despite the difficulty of "sustaining momentum" in linear narrative, "any narrative move [is] only exciting if it works, and if it couldn't be done any other way" (2017b). Interestingly enough, Egan's promotional interview for the novel (2017a) also travels back in time as she thematically and aesthetically reviews her whole personal life and career as a writer, pressing on the linear as much as the sentimental. Though not rigged, Egan's timing and momentum read certainly as contrived as honestly well played.

The Vulnerable Text as a Calculated Risk

And yet readers did not seem to get it. In 2018, a reader nicknamed Sherri posted the question "By chance will this have a sequel?" to five devastating answers in Goodreads (n.d.), including "I hope not; it was painful enough reading this one." If, according to Mitchell and Snyder (2000), the recourse to disability as narrative prosthesis should have made Egan's narrative strong, or if, according to Garland-Thomson (2019), the spectacularity of Lydia's radical disability should have sufficed to appeal to

the reader's morbid gaze, the opinion of Egan's readers should have disagreed with academic criticism. Despite its strong symbolism, its touching lyricism, its powerful characters, its commitment with historical accuracy, its strong internal coherence, and management of momentum, Egan's novel is extremely vulnerable to its reader's eye.

Could they miss the thematic parallelisms with 9/11? Could they miss the honest nostalgia for a lost innocence (their own, their country's) that is demanded from them? Could they miss the imperative to engage empathically with the uninhabitable vulnerability of a character who demands kisses when facing the ominous sea of Manhattan Beach? Or would they reject the aesthetics signaling the end of postmodernist ironic detachment lest its implied acknowledgment of a shared vulnerability would finally feel as "the end of something [...] that had begun with the rise of America as a superpower at the end of world war two" (Egan 2017b)?

Like Lydia's spectacular disability, Egan's narrative is vulnerable because it engages with sentimentalism and lyrical beauty. It could certainly be argued that Lydia's impossible beauty only adds to the novel's sentimental ableism by pressing on the nostalgia for the beauty she would have been (Garland-Thomson 2019, 379). While that is clearly the case for her father as he considers that "[t]he alloy of beauty and contortion in Lydia suggested [...] the shadow of what she should have been" (2017c, 267), in her sister's, her mother's, and—most importantly—in the narrator's eyes, Lydia is beautiful not only despite her many disabilities, but somehow *because* of them. Similarly, when the narrator describes Lydia's disabled body in detail, the images and language of those passages are of an incredibly delicate beauty. Even in Lydia's final moments, Anna lifts her head "to take in her sister's radiant flesh, the delicate bones of her face, her luxuriant hair. Her eyes seemed to flicker under their long lashes as if she were watching them through the silken drapery of her lids" (2017c). Although Styles recursively thinks of her as "the cripple," the first time he encounters Lydia, he is arrested by her paradigmatic feminine beauty:

A beautiful girl lay splayed on one of the beds in what appeared to be an erotic faint, pale curls scattered in the half-light like spilled coins [...]. Only when her smell reached him did he realize he'd been dreading it, expecting that rank odor of bodies in rooms without much air. But she smelled fresh, wonderful, even, that version of flowers that inheres in feminine creams and shampoos.

(152–153)

Despite the Kerrigan's economic precariousness, everything surrounding Lydia is luxurious, not because they try to compensate her disability with material riches, but rather, because her vulnerability somehow makes her

more delicate and precious, and those luxuries would inherently belong in her; the warm baths, the special lilac shampoo, the Cashmere Bouquet talc, the cotton nightie trimmed with Belgian lace (Egan 2017c, 25), the blue velvet dress, and wool stockings (152). Her sister and her mother often contemplate Lydia's beauty with almost reverence, "[t]here was an aching satisfaction," the narrator explains, "in saving the best for her, as if she were a secret princess deserving their tribute" (25).

Lydia's beauty and (also the Kerrigans' surrogate) vulnerability are pervasively depicted in the novel as a luxury. To Anna, the luxury of Styles' mansion by Manhattan Beach is epitomized in his daughter's Flossie Doll, which she craves, although she knows she cannot have because they are too poor to afford, but mostly because accepting it as a gift would weaken her. To hide her economic vulnerability, Anna refuses having the doll as a gift from Styles' daughter on account of having "a bigger one at home" (Egan 2017c, 10). The equivalence between this Flossie Flirt and Lydia is unsubtly suggested several times in the novel by presenting them as a luxury and a vulnerability, as well as through the beauty and vacancy of their blue eyes (10). When Styles meets Lydia for the first time, he reflects: "Her eyes were luminous blue, unblinking, like the eyes of the dolls Tabby [his daughter] used to play with" (153). Also, the very presence and contact with either the Flossie Flirt and Lydia brings Anna "a burst of pure joy that nearly made her laugh" (10).

That Lydia's disability functions as narrative prosthesis is perhaps contradicted by the fact that her death takes place before the middle of the novel, which, according to Mitchell and Snyder's (2000) views on this metaphorical device, should stop the narrative motor of the story. In Egan's novel, however, narrative momentum is sustained after Lydia's death through the many vulnerabilities addressed by the novel, while the spectacularity of lyrical intensity (the parallelisms, the rhythm, the symbolisms, the imagery, the metaphorical density, the alliterations, etc.), and recourse to sentimentalism also extend beyond her disability. The interpretive key to these vulnerabilities is however provided at the very beginning of the novel through a very obvious metaphor that draws on disability as much as on national history through the brief digression that tells Mr. Graztky's story. Mr. Graztky "was a shut-in. He'd a hole in his side from the Great War that hadn't healed in sixteen years" (Egan 2017c, 24). When Anna asks to see his wound, he showed "her a small round opening, pink and glistening as a baby's mouth" (24). In this case, Egan visualizes disability in lyrical terms evoking tenderness through an unexpectedly beautiful simile, but she also presses on the ongoing affliction endured by those who survive war trauma. The time span of this open wound that refuses to heal coincides with the time elapsed from 9/11 to the publication of Egan's novel.

Despite the many motifs that connect Egan's historical novel to 9/11 (the 1929 crash, the systemic collapse of the nation, the internal division

between different ethnic groups that turn against each other to deny their own vulnerabilities, the interdependence between economy and war, and the pervasive visualization of disabled bodies), the proleptic connection between World War II and 9/11 is most evident at the end of the novel, where a symbolic fog functions as a narrative closure opening into the future. As Anna and Eddie face their hopeful (Western) future, they watch a dustlike, ocean fog that “was different, solid-looking enough to mold with your hands [...] engulfing whole cities like amnesia [like] the aftermath of a silent, distant explosion” (Egan 2017c, 432–433). This fog was a narrative contrivance from the beginning, where it also stands as a metaphor for forgetfulness. At the beginning of the novel, the fog surrounds the Styles’ luxurious mansion, which is described as “a palace of golden brick” (3), “a castle by the sea” (22) inhabited by pretty Flossie Dolls and pretty princess-like dying young ladies like Annabel Lee-dia, who can only talk through nostalgic, echolalic refrains.

The burdensome sense of an innocence lost in 9/11 pervades the novel through subtle but unmistakable recourse to a lost literary ideal (sometimes overtly Dickensian—like in the De Veer’s story—or Poesian—like in Lydia’s case) that grieves for the loss of the American Dream. Egan’s novel affords to create a public space for grieving this loss, but it does so at a price so high that it makes her novel a luxury for her authorial persona and her literary career. The luxury—and vulnerability—in this case, seems to be losing her post-ironic recourse to representing vulnerability and beauty against a national backdrop, a luxury that neither the reading market, nor criticism, nor the American peoples can afford lest they become vulnerable themselves through grieving. Yet the recourse to beauty in the face of vulnerability is to Egan, her “own survival mode” (2017a).

In the rigged game of make-believe, pretty girls don’t play dice. Instead, they calculate the risks of fair narrative game, which in this case build on not only narrative prosthesis for momentum and lyrical language for aesthetic intensity, but also a social commitment to the vulnerability of others that begins by embracing our uninhabitable identification with them. In the case of *Manhattan Beach*, the risk of visibilizing intersecting vulnerabilities at the expense of their spectacularization is calculated against the strength of lyrical beauty and sentimentalism as strategic standpoints for resilience, while a sense of narrative continuity and stylistic nostalgia helps in giving direction and purpose to historical closure. Yet that Egan’s honesty to the genre and her readers also prevents the foreclosure of critique is evidenced by how much of that critique she is ready to take for her work and herself in order to visibilize the faces of those who suffered, and still suffer, the long train of abuses behind the USA’s ableist, exceptionalist, individualist claim for national invulnerability. If anything, the purpose and the task certainly show the narrative strength behind Egan’s

unblinking, blue eyes as they press on the irony underlying the end of postmodernist ironic detachment.

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