

Foreword

*On a cold rainy night on a Liverpool quayside
In the years before the great war
The world was in shock at the loss of Titanic,
So proud had they been days before;
Relatives gathered for news of the loved ones,
To read through the list of the dead,
When into the throng came a sad eyed old polar bear:
And to the clerk at the counter he said:*

*Have you got any news of the iceberg?
My family were on it you see:
Have you got any news of the iceberg?
They mean the whole world to me.*

*My wife and my children were coming from Greenland,
To be by my side at the zoo:
Belinda's my wife, and the eldest's called Bernard:
And Billy, well, he's only two.
I know on the ship there were hundreds of people,
And I know that the iceberg's not yours:
The polar bear's eyes held the start of his teardrops:
He covered his face with his paws.*

*Have you got any news of the iceberg?
My family were on it you see:
Have you got any news of the iceberg?
They mean the whole world to me.*

- Les Barker (Any News of the Iceberg?)

In *Any News of the Iceberg?* Les Barker fuses the familiar with the unbelievable. On the one hand, the poem naturalises and reaffirms basic structures of human empathy and familial ties. Indeed, it extends these characteristics to the non-human world. Listening to the polar bear's story, we can relate to his anxious plea for news, even bad news, amidst the dread of uncertainty. But we also cannot help but acknowledge the unbelievability of a talking, family-loving, grief-laden polar bear. By fusing these elements in the package of an absurdist narrative, Barker enables the reader to see things from a different perspective. The poem upends our understandings by pointing out that for a polar bear an iceberg is a site of refuge and a ship brings danger. And as a result we not only have an enhanced understanding of polar bear livelihoods; we also receive a new impetus for questioning our common sense assumptions about the ways in which we encounter and know a fundamental space of human experience: the sea.

By throwing our perceptual framework into disarray Barker's poem leads us to reconsider the sea as something much more complex than its usual depiction as the surface upon which elements including icebergs and ships float, occasionally meeting up with each other to disastrous effect. In *Any News of the Iceberg?*, the sea is a space of both sanctuary and danger. It is an alien environment but also a habitat. It is a surface for crossings but also a site of distinct points (some of which are hazards, or refuges, or both). Those points themselves are mobile, which, in turn, challenges their ontological status as 'places' in the ordinary, static sense. Furthermore, we learn from Barker's story that the sea is not simply liquid water. It is also ice. And although Barker does not develop this point, it is also air, including the mist that complicated initial sightings of the iceberg by the *Titanic* and later sightings of the *Titanic* by rescue ships. And it is seabed, where the remains now lie.

Additionally, although the ocean in *Any News of the Iceberg?* is beyond land it exists in constant interaction with land. In part these connections with land are cultural, as in the voyages of cruise ships like the *Titanic* where land-based social rituals are transplanted to water. But they are also geophysical: the iceberg that sunk the *Titanic* consisted of glacial ice that almost certainly had calved off the coast of Greenland. In Barker's story we learn that the sea is forever (it is a timeless grave) but we also learn that it is a space of fleeting encounters and geophysical recompositions. Indeed, today, one hundred years after sinking the *Titanic*, the iceberg that is the subject of Barker's poem in all probability no longer exists.

Perhaps most significantly, however, we learn from Barker's poem that the sea is a space of multiple, and at times contradictory, *experiences*. Whether experienced tactilely (e.g. by polar bears), visually (e.g. by cruise ship passengers), or virtually (e.g. by readers of the poem), the sea is a space where singular stories are told about a multiplicitous environment.

Barker's poem thus provides a fitting entry point for this book about the various ways in which we experience the sea and make sense of those maritime encounters. To be certain, not all of the themes suggested by Barker receive equal coverage in *Seascapes*. When the editors, Mike Brown and Barbara Humberstone, state in their opening chapter that they intend to focus on "how experiences [of the ocean] might inform collective interpretations and how collective representations influence their lived experiences," they appear to be restricting their focus to *human* experiences. There are no polar bears in this book, and if they were to appear they almost certainly would not be talking. But even the human experience, especially at sea, has a more-than-human element to it. Consider one of the quotations from Bernard Moitessier that appears in Brown and Humberstone's introductory chapter: "I watch this fantastic sea, breathe in its spray, and feel blossoming here in the wind and space something that needs the immensity of the universe to come to fruition." Moitessier's experience may be specifically human, but it is an experience of something that both *exceeds* and *becomes* himself.

In other words, even when experienced virtually, the ocean is encountered as a profoundly *real* space, a characteristic that is sometimes lost in nineteenth century romantic accounts of the ocean sublime. The authors in this book not only think *with* the sea, they think *in* the sea, and, because the sea is immersive it is, as Brown and Humberstone stress, also transformative of who we are and how we think. When we sense the awesome power of an undertow or a crashing wave or a glistening horizon we are changed and our understanding of the world is changed, whether or not we get wet.

Indeed, distance can sometimes enhance the encounter by providing a critical perspective. I became aware of this around 1999, when I was living in Florida and became friends with a somewhat bored computer network administrator who was seeking certification to fly recreational single-engine aircraft. I joined him in the cockpit on a few training runs and, probably in violation of Federal Aviation Administration rules, occasionally took over the controls. As we flew over the barrier islands of North Florida's Gulf Coast and I mischievously dipped the wings, I observed a diminishing series of sand bars in the water, parallel to land, each less distinct (and deeper) than the previous, trailing away from the coast. I had read previously about dunes migrating toward land, progressively forming new generations of barrier islands, cyclically disrupting and reproducing the coastal geomorphology as wave action pushes sediment ever coastward. I understood the process intellectually. But from the air I could actually *see* the temporality of the sea, not just in the circulations of waves and tides (which I had previously experienced on the ground) but in the long-term movements of sand. These movements, I realised, were a part of the sea, just as much as the shorter-term movements of water expressed through waves and tides. I understood, as never before, how the ocean is dynamic with sediment as well as water.

It was also at this moment that I truly understood that although the barrier island functionally appears to be *of the land* (one can walk on a barrier island, build a home there, and, perhaps most importantly, register that home with a civic authority as 'property'), ecologically it is *of the sea*. Prior to that day, I had spent many hours standing on barrier islands pondering the sea's awesome, transformative force and attempting to connect with it in successive expressions of an overreaching romanticism. But only now, by experiencing the sea from a new, distanced perspective, could I take this to the next step. Only now was I able to comprehend the limits of a perspective wherein one fragment of space is designated 'sea', another fragment is designated 'land', and wherein one is defined as a creature who thinks that one of these two categories of space is his natural habitat and that the other is inherently alien.

Was my aerial encounter with the ocean truly an *experience*? I acknowledge that it was distanced. Furthermore, it was limited to only one sense (the visual) and at no point during the flight did I have a phenomenological experience of being 'one with the water' (which is probably a good thing!). But who truly has an authentic sea experience? The SCUBA diver looking through a face mask? The ship passenger gazing out from a deck? The surfer who for but a fleeting moment exists at the intersection of its various components – the making and breaking of waves, the movement of molecules, the joy of uplift? The swimmer who is counting breaths? Even for Les Barker's polar bear the

immersive experience of the ocean is mediated by a cognitive focus on distinct objects: the iceberg, the family members, the memories of home.

Of course we can never truly know the thoughts of a polar bear, the elusive cyborg of this foreword. But we can think *through* the polar bear, just as we can think *through* the ocean, using these alternative (but nonetheless real) assemblages of space, time, and matter to upend our assumptions and change ourselves. The chapters of this book provide a key starting point for this project. Ultimately they are not so much chapters about the sea or even about our experiences of the sea as they are chapters about humans who are thinking, reactive creatures who navigate their place in the world as they navigate the oceans. No compass can guide this journey. Indeed, the journey never resolves itself in a 'place': the sea's dynamism confounds our everyday understandings of a point as something to which we can return. If you define the ocean as your home, then, like Les Barker's polar bear, you can recall it only in its dissipation and in its ultimate disappearance. But if one doesn't have a destination, one can never be truly lost. Rather, the ocean is a journey of experiences filled with partial knowledges. And that is where this book begins.



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