

Eating the Ocean

By Elspeth Probyn

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Reviewed by Emily Potter

ELSPETH PROBYN'S *EATING THE OCEAN* OPENS ONTO A 'A SPARKLING DAY ON SYDNEY Harbour' (1) in a scene that captures both the methodology and the research ethics of this expansive and engaging book. It is also a scene reminiscent of Probyn's earlier work *Outside Belongings* (1996), which begins amongst the residents of 'balconville', Montreal. In both, Probyn is located within what she describes—in the first instance, an intricate more-than-human ecology of Sydney's most famous body of water, in the second, the community of Montreal residents who live on the 'outside', connected to the world, and to each other, via a network of balconies. The thread between these textual beginnings is profound relationality and situated research practice. Probyn has no interest in an evaluative, omniscient stance. For her, and throughout her many publications, thinking in the middle of things is crucial. Embodied experience is a way of knowing that highlights entanglements. All that gathers in and around the Harbour on this glorious day—people, animals, weather, pollution, capital, politics, stories, other times and places—is brought into the material process of consuming oysters and enjoying a glass of wine in the sun. This small act of eating the ocean, we soon realise, is infinitely more complicated than we might have imagined.

Eating the Ocean is a call for a new kind of food politics, as much as it is a mapping of complex human-fish histories. Probyn is motivated in reaction against the shallow moralisms and middle-class comforts of what she calls 'fork waving'—the protest from the plate, as it were—and refutes the belief that ethical eating is an individualised practice of choice. While what we choose to eat, and purchase, matters, 'choice' is situated in a vast and dynamic network of structural, material, affective and imaginative factors. There are multiple, often competing, oceanic realities produced all the time in the practice of these, something that the prevalent rhetoric of consumer-led change obscures.

Probyn's imperative is to move the focus of contemporary food politics away from the domain of the terrestrial and its environmental limits. The ocean is an under-acknowledged resource for the long-term sustainability of reliable food sources for the world's exploding population. Yet its current state of pillage—the result of cultural, as much as commercial, pressures—puts this potential in question. The preference for fish at the upper end of the food chain, such as tuna and swordfish, has resulted in their almost total depletion from certain waters around the world (leading to what scientists bleakly refer to as a 'simplified sea' [24]). This has massive consequences for aquatic systems, and also for the local communities who once relied on supplying these disappeared fish to the market. Probyn's book is full of poignant examples, particularly from the UK, of communities and townships evacuated of economic possibility by the collapse of local fishing industries.

These examples also testify to market logic, too, which creates new markets out of negative externalities. The burgeoning trades in crustaceans that now thrive in areas absented of previous predators evidence this, but the beneficiaries of these booming populations in crayfish and prawns do not easily map back onto the same communities. The globalisation of seafood commerce has disrupted economies once structured around very localised fishing industries. The book, in a tacit way, speaks to some of the anxieties that seem to have fueled Brexit and the slow post-industrial economic transition facing many areas of the UK. The waters off Peterhead in Scotland, a town that once derived its identity from whaling, followed by fishing, are now largely worked by crews from South East Asia. Probyn gives the example of a Filipino fishing crew who spend 11 months away from home in these waters: something, Probyn, observes, that while an economic necessity for these men, 'does little to build community' in Peterhead (120). Presumably this impacts on community life back in the Philippines, too. It would be an interesting extension to follow the other end of this story, and the consequences at a local level for men like these Filipinos, who take their fishing skills and labour outside their home contexts to source a catch destined for more affluent tables across the world.

These kinds of connections, and the vast fishy more-than-human networks that encircle the globe—not all of which, of course, can be followed in one book—are what *Eating the Ocean* constantly points to. Its entire remit is complex relationality, and what the book does cover is impressively wide in its interconnected scope. As we move through it, we journey with Probyn across oceans, fishing communities, fish farms and markets, into history, literature, memory, and even her mouth as it takes in various kinds of seafood, from the luscious (for some) oysters that she so loves, to guilt-inducing 'rare and expensive' Bluefin tuna sandwiches (93). In doing so, we experience a host of generative theoretical encounters as Probyn brings her long-time engagements

with thinkers such as Deleuze, Foucault, Bourdieu, and Grosz, into the space of new materialism and the recent proliferation of writing on the post- or more-than-human (Probyn prefers the latter term, she tells us, for its relational inclusivity).

The book's five chapters follow aspects of 'human-fish entanglements' (5), from Probyn's explication of an affective, oceanic habitus; to the material minglings of human and oyster; to the making of Bluefin tuna as a creature of desire, wealth and now elusiveness; and to the gendered history of the ocean and its human communities, one in which women have been economically and culturally marginalised. This is a powerful chapter that spotlights not just the often hidden or forgotten labour of women in an industry so associated with men, but also, very productively, refracts questions of gender and sexuality into an interrogation of new materialist philosophy and critical debates concerning the 'Anthropocene' more broadly.

Probyn gives voice to what I suspect is the discomfort of a growing number of scholars regarding the position of male voices within this fashionable field, and the subsuming of feminist or queer politics by the imperatives of 'all humanity'. As Probyn retorts, 'the über threat [of climate change] does not cast its shadow equitably upon us all' (105). This is also a caution against the 'theoretical busyness' of some new materialist theory, which in a flurry of riffs and self-conscious conceptual play, may obscure a 'crucial baseline of gender and queer: of the kinds of embodied engagement, the lived relatedness of stuff that matters' (110). This queer relatedness, for Probyn, is crucial to an ethics of care that might mean we live more reciprocally with the ocean and its life: eating it as it eats us. This is also the space of the middle in which thought is propelled by our own more-than-human outside, and here Probyn activates the nautical term 'athwart' which also references Eve Sedgwick's concept of queer, meaning 'across'.

The final chapter of this inspiring book—that seems, in an 'athwart' meaning of this word, to expand with the many, many lives that swim, labour and imagine throughout it—focuses on the pragmatic question of sustaining human and fish lives into the future. Overfishing must stop, but the potential of aquatic protein cannot be ignored. And so, it is to the little fish that we must look. Along with oysters, which so captivate Probyn with their long, sensuous histories, little fish—think sardines, anchovies, and menhaden—are the heroes of Probyn's story. These fish are stalwarts that can sustain vast populations, as a fascinating case study of the anchovy in Peru makes clear. Food activists there have fought to have nutrient-dense and very affordable anchovies rescued from an abject position in Peruvian culture, harvested to be pulped for fish meal and shipped off to fish farms overseas. A campaign to de-stigmatise the anchovy and put it back

on the plate in Peru has been strikingly successful, and makes a great deal of sense in a country with high rates of poverty and child malnutrition.

Such examples of oceanic ethics in practice make meaningful the so-often empty concept of sustainability—another discursive field over which Probyn casts a validly critical eye. What is frequently missing from ‘sustainability’ is the complexity that Probyn is so careful to attend to. This complexity, as the book makes clear, is not captured in theoretical statements alone. Rather, it is in the detail of lived, embodied, historicised counters between and across more-than-human bodies, energies, materials and imaginaries that complexity is best encountered. And here, in the middle of things, thinking and feeling are propelled. This is the ocean as far from simple; this is an ocean ‘to eat with’ (163).

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