

BOOK REVIEW

Book review of *Thinking like an iceberg*, by Olivier Remaud (2022). Stephen Muecke, trans. Medford, MA: Polity. 180 pp. ISBN 978-1-509-55148-4.

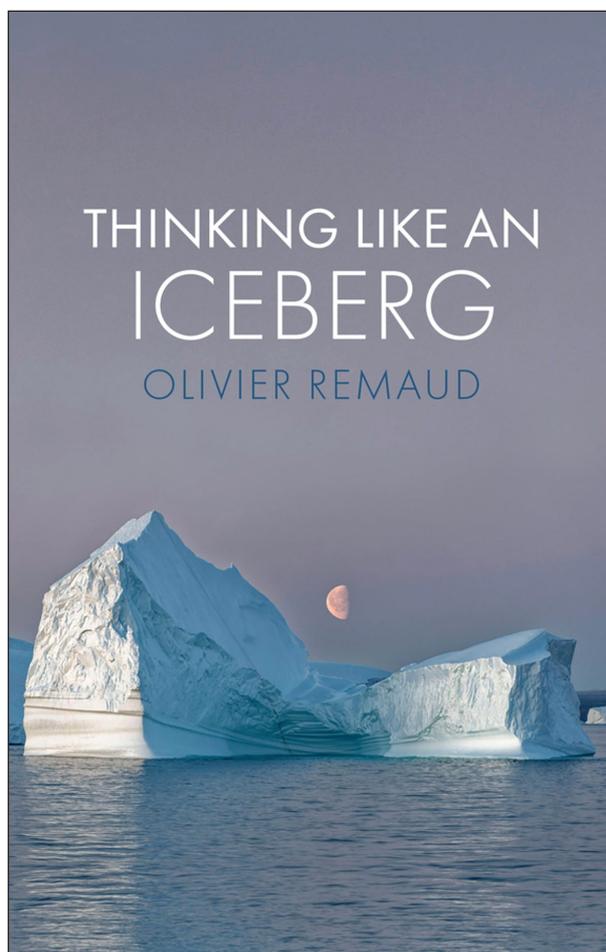
What does it involve to think like an iceberg? Such is the question posed by philosopher Olivier Remaud in *Thinking like an iceberg*. Translated from the original French (*Penser comme un iceberg*) into English by Stephen Muecke, the book explores the multifaceted and porous histories of describing and thinking about and alongside ice. Taken as a whole, the book brings together glaciology, environmental history, anthropological studies and accounts, and historic and contemporary aesthetic responses to ice. It takes up the call by Mark Carey et al. to generate alternative approaches to and representations of ice through “storytelling, narrative, literature, and the visual arts” (Carey et al. 2016: 15). Through Remaud’s writing, ice manifests a human-like consciousness, with icebergs reduced to a human-like scale for our better understanding. By synthesizing historical and contemporary research into the social, cultural and environmental histories of, and relationships with, ice, Remaud encourages the reader to query how icebergs might be thought of as alive and as active agents in their own futurity.

Remaud begins (and ends) with a fictional retelling of Captain James Cook’s 18th-century voyage in search of *terra australis* from the perspective of an iceberg: “Call me the ‘Impassable’. I am the one who stopped Cook on his second voyage around the world” (p. 2). Playing on the custom of naming ships, Remaud introduces the personified narrative of the ice that is the leitmotif of the book. Steeped in metaphor, the shifting perspective of the narrator is at times disorientating, as the reader tries to untangle the voices of Remaud, other scholars and the implied consciousness of the ice across human histories and geographies. These geographies are often firmly rooted in the Arctic and Antarctic, with few exceptions.

At the outset of Chapter One, Remaud introduces Frederic Edwin Church’s painting, *The icebergs* (1861, Dallas Museum of Art), alongside Louis Legrand Noble’s written account of the voyage that inspired the painting (Noble 1861), as indicative of a Western cultural imagination. Remaud writes that the two men were “iceberg hunters” (p. 4), tasked with recreating the sublime

Correspondence

Isabelle Gapp, Department of Art History, University of Toronto, Sidney Smith Hall, 100 George St., Toronto, ON M5S 3G3, Canada.
E-mail: icbgapp@gmail.com



experience of the ice on paper and in painting. Following this, the author’s own experiences during a trip to Iceland are briefly situated within the human fascination for ice. Exploring the aesthetics of the sublime through Noble’s detailed depiction, Remaud leans into the role of metaphor used to describe ice within historic exploratory accounts. He writes, “The metaphorical gaze, transposing one environment into another, is no less a characteristic of the Romantic spirit. Western travellers are word-smiths. They make sentences” (p. 16). The heavy use of metaphor and analogy is both a strength and weakness of Remaud’s narrative. At times evocative of the capacity of human and animal life to inform an understanding of icebergs, these metaphors largely turn the history and story of ice into a tangled web of words.

This aesthetic fascination with ice continues into the second chapter, wherein Remaud explores the creation of

icebergs; in other words, where do icebergs come from? Beyond using glaciology to explain the formation of glaciers, Remaud writes how “A drop of liquid falls from the sky in the shape of a snowflake” (p. 29), these building up in layers over millennia to form an icesheet. Through this evolutionary process, glaciers, like icebergs, are regarded as being alive. “[I]f they move, are they alive?” asks Remaud (p. 33). Glaciers and icebergs are described in relation to human and animal behaviour. The glacier, the mother, becomes the iceberg, her child. The use of “mother” by glaciologists in relation to certain glaciers is turned by Remaud into an elaborate familial bond between glacier and iceberg. Remaud extends this metaphor to the behaviour of whales, noting the parallels between icebergs and whale calves as described by Kalaaleq whalers and hunters and retold by Western whalers in the 19th century. Remaud claims that through the words given to glaciers and icebergs, humans have given them life. Consideration of ice in non-Arctic and non-European environments, such as in Iran, the Andes and the Himalayas, and engagement with the work of Karine Gagné, Ravi Baghel and Peter G. Knight among others, would have further strengthened Remaud’s study of ice as a global agent.

In the third chapter, Remaud explores life on the ice and takes us below the water’s surface into invisible icy spaces. Remaud proposes that, unlike the sublime, which was preoccupied with the iceberg visible above the water’s surface, “The realm of the iceberg lies below the waterline. Its soul resides in the underwater world” (p. 86). Drawing upon the work of Barry Lopez, Remaud describes ice as simultaneously disorientating and teeming with life. He reanimates Lopez’s discussion in *Arctic dreams* (1986) of the submerged body of the iceberg as a distinct ecotone. Here, the surprising appearance of QR codes printed onto the pages of *Thinking like an iceberg* allows the soundscape of ice to be experienced through film and audio recordings of the movement of ice below the water’s surface.

Meanwhile, movement atop the ice is transformed by Remaud into an ethnography of Inuit wayfinding with reference to the work of anthropologists Edmund Carpenter and Tim Ingold. The following chapter largely focuses on the presence of ice as a part of Inuit society. Here, environmental memory is juxtaposed with Inuit birth memories, where the baby is like the iceberg that calves from the mother (glacier). And yet, first-hand Inuit voices and memories and the work of Inuit scholars are notably absent. Only Zacharias Kunuk’s film, *Atanarjuat: the fast runner* (2001), intersects Remaud’s retelling of Inuit relationships to ice. The work of Julie Cruikshank is used to highlight these social relationships. Meanwhile, Inuit perspectives are filtered through the

work of primarily white anthropologists, geographers and novelists, including Bernard Saladin d’Anglure, Shari Fox and Bérangère Cournut. Such a focus required engagement with, to name only a handful of examples, the writings and artistry of Sheila Watt-Cloutier, Jen Rose Smith, Joan Naviyuk Kane, Tanya Tagaq and Laakkuluk Williamson Bathory or independent collaboration and conversation between Remaud and Inuit communities, those to whom these stories belong.

Just as Western language has given life to ice, Inuit words that describe the different types of ice and its behaviour “confirm that language constantly registers the modified states of ice” (p. 102). Although human action and interaction are seen by Remaud as the main culprits behind climate change, he also notes the effect of ice on human behaviour. Bringing together numerous Western scholarly perspectives on Indigenous relationships to ice, Remaud summarizes that spiritual rituals are themselves dying as icebergs are melting. Icebergs “are upset: no one speaks to them any more,” he concludes (p. 117). Remaud explores the idea that glaciers and icebergs are aware of their own mortality, and that they are “undoubtedly an ‘endangered species’ today” (p. 127). In Chapter 5, our focus is diverted to glaciers that have been classed as heritage sites, going beyond the idea of ice as archive. Remaud queries, how do you preserve something that is in a perpetual state of melting? Memorializations of ice, such as with the “death” of the Okjökull glacier in Iceland, are included as examples of how ice “incorporates the history of the Earth as well as that of humanity” (p. 138), with humans conversely facing their own mortality. As snow no longer has time to build up and form glacial masses, glaciers themselves become more and more like icebergs, fleeting and melting. “If no ice covers the Earth, the world itself becomes lonely,” suggests Remaud (p. 152). Problematizing the use of the term “wilderness” to describe ice and the cryosphere because it implies that glaciers and icebergs exist in solitude, Remaud proposes that “To abandon the representation of the solitary iceberg is to begin to repopulate the ice worlds” (p. 134). By giving agency to ice, the cryosphere becomes a site that has always been teeming with life as well as itself being alive.

At the end of his book, Remaud reformulates his leading question by asking “Who has ever thought like an iceberg?” (p. 155). Returning to the earlier analogy between ice and birth, Remaud tells a fictitious story centred around a young Inuit boy: “He has become an iceberg again” (p. 155). Inuit perspectives and agency are used by Remaud as tools to reaffirm the agency of ice. Returning to the role of the narrator, the “we” of the story, Remaud takes us back to the

boat that carried Church and Noble towards the icebergs, before then returning to the “wild life” of icebergs (p. 157). In this succinct conclusion, Remaud proposes that icebergs are teachers. They “are discreet colossi, antidotes to narcissism,” through whom humans might learn to better themselves and improve their understanding of global climate change: “In them lies the preservation of the world. It is time to think like an iceberg” (p. 159).

Thinking like an iceberg tells a detailed and imaginative story of ice that sees ice as aware of its own existence and fate and its role within human society and history. Through the elaborate use of metaphor and the narrative retelling of existing scholarship, Remaud’s philosophical contribution to the field of ice humanities, recently proposed by Dodds & Sörlin (2022), is a challenging read. As glaciers continue to melt at alarming rates and ever-larger icebergs calve into the ocean, Remaud has created a book that prompts us to contemplate in a new way what it

means to lose this shifting, cracking, bubbling and increasingly temporary structure and surface.

References

- Carey M., Jackson M., Antonello A. & Rushing J. 2016. Glaciers, gender, and science: a feminist glaciology framework for global environmental change research. *Progress in Human Geography* 40, 770–793, doi: 10.1177/030913251562336.
- Dodds K. & Sörlin, S. (eds.) 2022. *Ice humanities: living, thinking and working in a melting world*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Kunuk Z. (director) 2001. *Atanarjuat: the fast runner*. Isuma Igloolik Productions.
- Lopez B. 1986. *Arctic dreams: imagination and desire in a Northern landscape*. New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons.
- Noble L.L. 1861. *After icebergs with a painter: a summer voyage to Labrador and around Newfoundland*. New York: D. Appleton and Company.