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Titan implosion: a sea of misery or a sea of relation

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ABSTRACT

In June 2023, the *Titan* submersible suffered a catastrophic implosion that killed its entire crew. Using the contestation of the media framing of this event as a point of departure, this article hypothesizes that a lack of sympathy on social media (versus mainstream media) was the result of a political enthusiasm for social change that is absent moral enthusiasm for the crew because the sea has been figured in a way that is symbolically miserable. This figuration (as a constellation of surfaces and depths, beyond and between) is in the service of capital and the maintenance of the nation-state and runs counter to the idea that the sea is a site of relation. It is argued that any ontological challenge to this figuration must be supplemented with a phenomenological account of the sea as an environment of moral experience. This would then encourage political enthusiasm to coincide with moral enthusiasm.

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On 18 June 2023, contact with the *Titan* submersible, descending the Atlantic to explore the wreckage of the *Titanic,* was lost. On board were Stockton Rush, the chief executive of OceanGate, the company that provided the submersible; Hamish Harding, the chair of a private plane company and a keen explorer, with trips to the south pole and to space under his belt; Shahzada Dawood, vice-chair of a petrochemical conglomerate, and his son Suleman, present as deep sea tourists; and Paul-Henri Nargeolet, a former naval commander with an extensive history of exploring wrecks, the *Titanic* in particular (see Grierson et al., 2023). A media spectacle quickly grew as a rescue mission was launched, lasting days, ultimately forlorn since the *Titan* had in reality imploded less than two hours into its descent, killing all on board. The event became a site of contested narratives, legacy media advancing a frame of urgency until this fate was known, and then retreating into a defensive framing that would settle the loss as a haunting tragedy (for example, Morelle & Francis, 2024; The Telegraph, 2024), as a social media backlash gathered pace in the form of criticism (of the mission and of the coverage) and dark humour (see Gelt, 2023). Jokes, memes and naked celebration quickly circulated. This backlash seemed motivated by the identity-types of the *Titan's* crew: two billionaires (Harding and Dawood) in a context of growing, yawning wealth inequality; an entrepreneur (Rush), cost-cutting at the expense of mission safety (such as using a video games controller to steer the *Titan,* ignoring industry standards to make efficiency savings, and eschewing the normal safety testing procedures), a move familiar to anyone

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living through increasing rationalization and austerity; and extreme tourists (at minimum the Dawoods), whose monied pursuit of adventure put them in harm's way, plus the explorers (Harding, Nargeolet), who at least blur the line between the pursuit of discovery and tourism (see Weibel, 2023). Mainstream media commentators were left taking swipes at social media users for ignoring the human tragedy to share 'sickening' or 'ghoulish' posts about the *Titan* (for example, Brown, 2023; Callahan, 2023). But it should be no surprise that such an event at sea would be contested when the sea is itself a site of conceptual and material conflict.

This article is situated within theoretical approaches to the sea that set out its role in the development and maintenance of capitalism, figured as a space beyond society that delimits the nation-state and its sovereignty, constrained in the imaginary as a surface for movement and a depth for extraction and disposal, but rarely afforded the moral gravity that should go with its power to connect by its immense dynamism (Campling & Colás, 2021; Longo & Clark, 2016; Steinberg, 2001). The work here is given its impetus by the call to challenge the 'ontological sovereignty' that underpins the dominance of space (Wood-Donnelly, 2025), to initiate mobile or wet ontologies (Ehrenfeld, 2025; Steinberg & Peters, 2015), advancing throughout an argument that this ontological activism ought to be joined by a phenomenological supplement that would establish the sea as an environment of moral experience.

The article introduces, recycles or extends several useful conceptualizations. *Wet ontology* is an account of existence that echoes the fluidity of the sea rather than the (apparent) stability of the land (see Steinberg & Peters, 2015). *Marine phenomenology* would be its complement, an account of the sea that emphasizes its place in the production of experience, at sea or on land (see Pugh, 2016). *Moral enthusiasm* picks out the subjective experience of being moved by something that has moral gravity (see Hill, 2019). In turn, *political enthusiasm* encapsulates the collective experience of being moved towards an idea of justice (see Lyotard, 2009). *Symbolic misery* is the result of the manufacture of unmeaning by representation or the circulation of a constraining imaginary (see Stiegler, 2014, 2015). And *moral gravity* evokes the way that an entity or process demands responsibility and moves the individual to respond; its moral seriousness (see Hill, 2022).

The first section advances the hypothesis that the critical, light-hearted or celebratory response to the *Titan* implosion was shaped by political enthusiasm for a greater share of justice undermined by the short-circuiting of any immediate moral enthusiasm for the crew and passengers by the effect of the dominant imaginary of the sea as empty and beyond society. The second section substantiates this position by establishing the ways in which this symbolic misery legitimates and obscures forms of subjective and structural violence both historical and contemporary. The third section then advances the claim that another sea is possible if it can be freed from the frames of capital and the nation-state, which reduce it to an arrangement of surfaces and depths between and beyond nations, and recognized instead as an experiential site of traces (of slavery, invisible labour), encounters (with the approaching migrant and the distant other), and of dynamic magnitude possessed by the sea that establishes it as a body of moral gravity in itself and of relation at large.

The conclusion is then drawn in two parts. First, that geographies and histories and sociologies of the sea would be conceptually enriched by a relational turn that carries at its core not only a wet ontology but also a marine phenomenology that establishes the sea as a site of moral gravity. That is to say, a relational turn in the understanding and explanation of seas and ships, continents and islands, land-dwellers and sea-farers, must be underpinned not only by a dynamic understanding of what exists in the world but also a relational understanding of how the experience of these different ontological entities is co-constructed by how they interact, that together give us an

understanding of the ways that the sea presents us with sites and entities that are morally meaningful or that confront us with their moral seriousness. And second, that any political enthusiasm for a world without obscene wealth inequality and where it is not permissible for migrants to drown in defence of the nation-state fails without the revitalization of the sea as space of moral experience. This revitalization would facilitate a moral enthusiasm for incidents such as the loss of the *Titan* if it did not free the ocean in the first place from its dominance by billionaires and entrepreneurs and adventurers. In the end, it would give us a firmer basis to reject the gerrymandering of moral gravity that plays out in political and media discourse and that would constitute some lives lost at sea as meaningful while others are not.

Enthusiasm

Should something like the loss of the *Titan* not illicit a more widespread feeling of sympathy? Jokes and jubilation hardly seem to match the seriousness of the event. It might be expected that something of this magnitude would trigger a sense of moral responsibility to the individual lives imperilled and lost or at least reinforce an idea of a moral community that suffers such loss (see Hill, 2019). An argument along these lines would go something like the following.

The event could be understood as an encounter with the Kantian sublime, evocative of a feeling of magnitude or greatness that overwhelms the senses and does violence to the faculties (see Kant, 2008). This can be cashed out in a number of ways. It might be that the scale of the media coverage communicates an idea of extremity and momentousness that situates the event beyond the assimilable experience of the everyday. It could equally be that the extraordinariness of the environmental factors at play are rendered inestimable, a vast ocean in which to search for a lost submersible and its crew, a juxtaposition of scale between the vulnerable bodies that entered the underwater craft and the colossal bars of pressure bearing down on them, or the unfathomable enormity of the depth at which they were lost. Or it may be that what really takes human judgement beyond what it can hold in thought is the wounding or loss of those frail others, whose lives represent infinite possibility, unplottable and unimaginably rich, now imperilled or curtailed.

Any experience of the sublime would engender a feeling of humility, of one's own smallness in the face of what cannot be grasped or made to fit the limits of cognition; it could be that some combination of these experiences or all of them at once are attributable to the event in question. But it is the last of these, the encounter with human suffering that possesses a scale precisely composed of the incalculable loss that such suffering represents, and that would make those who encounter it suffer the violence of that scale themselves, since they try and fail to represent it to themselves, which would seem most urgent in this case. This encounter could be understood in the sense of Levinasian responsibility, an encounter with vulnerability that cannot communicate what is lost, since the other person extended through time is essentially infinite in possibility, but that communicates instead that there is a responsibility to respond (see Levinas, 2007, 2008). It is a response that is ultimately curtailed by the other elements of the sublime event – the distance, the depth, the pressure – but nonetheless it might be expected that news of lives threatened at sea would prompt not only a sense of humility but also an enthusiasm for their rescue or safe return.

An idea of enthusiasm found in the work of Jean-François Lyotard is worth articulating here, since it will be useful for understanding the response to the submarine disaster, even if that response did not exactly reach out to suffering others.

In *Enthusiasm* (2009), Lyotard develops a critique of history through his extension of the Kantian sublime to the political realm, arguing that the gap of judgement occasioned by the sublime

feeling in the face of momentous events opens a space of political possibility. This hinges on an idea of history not as the deeds of the actors involved but as the spontaneous response of those who bear witness to events and who then judge what is just. Events of sufficient magnitude represent a disorder – an unpredictable happening – that captures the witness in the humbling feeling of the sublime and excites an enthusiasm for new responses that take the situation beyond the restoration of the status quo, that call for everything previously accepted to be rethought. There is then a community of witnesses, autonomous still but together in this enthusiasm. And from this enthusiastic response starts to form an idea that holds witnesses in this community. In short: Something happens that is not merely a repetition of what has happened; because it cannot successfully be framed in terms of existing narratives or the normal procession of events it opens up a space for judgement without established criteria; witnesses to the event are brought into this space of possibility and contribute to the formation of a community around an idea; and this idea, forged in these conditions, might lead society out in the direction of greater justice.

Taking Lyotard into account, it is possible to articulate a sublime experience that goes beyond the aesthetic, not only as moral response (as when the magnitude of suffering evokes first humility and then an enthusiasm to respond to that suffering) but also now as a political response in a movement towards justice. While it is difficult to locate the moral content of the memes and dark humour that circulated in response to the *Titan* implosion, there is nonetheless a case to be made that the response was itself an articulation of a demand for justice.

To identify an enthusiasm is not to assume some intentionality, since every individual will have their own motivations for responding as they did, such that their agency is not in question. It is instead to plot the direction of the aggregate intensity of responses. And on social media, that direction was most pointedly against three related objects: the billionaire; the entrepreneur; and the adventurer. The billionaire stands as an unsympathetic figure, the beneficiary of a grossly uneven distribution of resources. The entrepreneur has authored their own fate, making efficiency savings even at inhuman depths. The adventurer has taken unnecessary risk and is anyway inseparable from those other personifications of capital. The *Titan* was more than a submersible; it was a microcosm of the dominance of the sea, and so of the land, by capital. Behind the billionaire, the institutions of capital (banking, insurance, infrastructure) that grew up around seafaring in the transition from mercantilism to capitalism; in the image of the entrepreneur, the emergence of the sea as a surface for frictionless trade; and in the shadow of the adventurer, the connection of the expedition to the expansion of capital's frontiers and the charting of the colony (see Campling & Colás, 2021, for a history of the sea and the development of capitalism). Taken together, the *Titan* became the focus of an enthusiasm for a different world, a world in which wealth was not horded by so few individuals, in which capital did not dominate time and space, a world in which a logic might prevail that was more than naked extraction and expropriation. At an individual level, an expression of ungenerosity towards suffering is not itself a phrasing of justice, but the aggregate intensity of the response to the *Titan* implosion nonetheless reached out towards an idea of the just transformation of the world. Nothing prescriptive, nothing programmatic, but an inchoate desire for a new move.

Those lost with the *Titan* might be seen to represent a force countervailing this justice. But this on its own cannot explain the apparent lack of enthusiasm for individual lives lost, or the outright celebration, at least not by the measure of the arguments advanced so far, since it is the enormity of the wounding of the other person that supports the whole edifice. So: What has short-circuited the movement of moral responsibility?

It might be that the sea has intervened; not the sea in-itself, but rather the sea in the popular imaginary. This sea has been figured empty. As Longo and Clark (2016) note, the sea has long been seen as beyond society, out of sight and out of mind, devoid of human meaning since it is a marine habitat and the human is not a marine creature. Jean Baudrillard (2009) worried about the impact of emptiness in a global media environment, 'where a "real" event occurs in a vacuum, stripped of its context and visible only from afar' (90). In this empty arena unfold

> events so minimal that they might well not need take place at all – along with their maximal enlargement on screens. No one will have directly experienced the actual course of such happenings, but everyone will have received an image of them. A pure event, in other words, devoid of any reference in nature, and readily susceptible to replacement by synthetic images. (Baudrillard, 2009, pp. 90–91)

The result is an engagement with a screen and not an engagement of desire or enthusiasm for the other. This would be compounded where events take place in an environment already set aside imaginatively, stripped of its natural context, already supposed empty of significant others before the presentation of the event could hollow it out further.

A lack of enthusiasm for those lost with the *Titan* would then not only be a product of their incongruity with an idea of justice but also the symbolic misery of the sea. In the work of Bernard Stiegler (2014, 2015), symbolic misery picks out the replacement of experience by conditioning, which destroys the capacity to form attachments with singularities (events, others). The singular – that which cannot be anticipated or calculated – is subsumed by the particular as the witness responds not to the event itself but to its framing. This conditioning, for Stiegler, is accelerated by the global media system, and, since the singular is particularized, leads to an erosion of the intersubjective space in which one encounters another as other.

But even before a disaster such as the *Titan* implosion is circulated as a particular image, the imaginary of the sea has already taken an immiserating effect. Steinberg and Peters (2015) document the big ideas that have denuded the ocean: Carl Schmitt and the claim that the sea has no character to imprint on humanity; Claude Levi-Strauss and the suggestion that the sea is flat and incapable of enlivening the human imagination; Roland Barthes and the contention that the seas carry no message, signifying nothing. The *Titan* was then lost in a sea of misery, lives taken beyond the bounds within which lives have meaning. This would be enough to short-circuit moral enthusiasm, even though another idea of the sea is possible.

Misery

The dominant imaginary of the sea has led to its symbolic misery, or what Baudrillard (2009, p. 140) called 'the hell of the Same'. But this construction is tied to historic and contemporary uses of the sea that locate it as a site of not only symbolic misery but also subjective and structural misery.

Édouard Glissant (2024) offers a vision of the sea as hell, or, Gehenna, in his account of the Atlantic slave trade. The sea that carried those stolen from homes also conveyed them through a process of symbolic annihilation, as everything familiar and everyday and appropriate to community was wrenched away. The sea is not only itself stripped of context; the slave too is rendered naked. It was also of course a voyage of physical torture and of the systematic unmaking of human persons, 'in a debasement more eternal than apocalypse' (Glissant, 2024, p. 6). This was a hell composed of three abysses, identified by Glissant: the belly of the boat, pregnant with those living under a death sentence; the depth of the sea, into which this human cargo was thrown

during storms or pursuit; and the final abyss straight ahead, the unknown realm of hell that constitutes the plantation.

This has been a sea that not only carries with it annihilation but also dominance. It drags away at the same time that it swells and swamps. This is the sea of civilization, or, as Glissant frames it, the imposition of civilization on the other, sea power in service of uniformity. While some are taken from their language, Spanish and Portuguese and English and French are exported by force. For Glissant, this demonstrates the logic of discovery, wherein something might be discovered so that it can be dominated and effectively destroyed. Languages, cultures, religions are all flattened by violence into a hell of the same. Civilization brings with it the rationalizing, universalizing thought of the civilizers; and so the singular is rationalized and lost along with the thought of the other. This is a form of discovery that never finds the other because it cannot allow otherness to remain. The adventurer also charts, breaking the new to fit it to the desired measure: the carving of territory, the fathoming of depths, the imposition of European time. Hasty and Peters (2012) note the way that the ship of discovery was simultaneously a scientific instrument, producing an understanding of the world that was then held in place by force. All of these discoveries and measurements were, for Glissant, a submission of the other to the imperialism of the same, of the discovered to a predetermined rule. Everything that cannot be held up to this measure is discarded, thrown into the void. The perversity of this valuation can be seen in the way that the discoverer or adventurer is celebrated over and above anything or anyone discovered. Glissant avers that this uniformity and control is the direction the world has been heading in, the abyss in front of all cultures, from the slave trade through global capital.

Capital has constructed the sea as a surface for its circulation. As Campling and Colás (2021) argue, global capital is seaborne in ways that constrain what the sea can be. The sea is then a series of trade routes, a supply chain, a store of resources, a dump for waste. Systems of measurement wedded to capital – cartographies, seabed surveys, fishing quotas – capture and commodify the sea. This is not to say that the sea can be tamed; if it exists to capital as a series of trade routes then it also imperils the safe passage of goods, which is why the history of banking and insurance is so entwined with that of seafaring. Steinberg (2001) argues that to the capitalist, the sea exists as a distance to be bridged between the locations of cheap labour and of relatively wealthier consumers; it is, as such, not only a surface for transportation but also a site of valorization. And this idea of a surface carries with it a commodity fetishism, whereby the labour performed offshore or at sea, often hard, miserable (see Borovnik, 2019), is lost in the mists.

When ships are detained by authorities for the nonpayment of fees, for example, the workers on board are often stranded. They are no longer paid but the reality of being onboard a ship means they must work simply to keep the vessel seaworthy. They often cannot leave the ship for want of an appropriate visa to go ashore. They have no supplies and are reliant on charity for food and water. 312 seafaring vessels were abandoned in this fashion in 2024, stranding more than 3000 sailors aboard their ships and leaving their families cut-off from income as wages amounting to £16 million went unpaid (see McVeigh, 2025). Recouping this remuneration is complicated by sailing under flags of convenience, which can make legal recourse difficult to effect. Flags of convenience use territorial symbolism to effectively circumvent responsibility at sea, rendering the ocean a moral non-place where workers are abandoned with their ships.

This idea of the sea as non-place is nowhere more apparent than in the world of logistics, where the image of the sea as surface is, as Craig Martin (2013) observes, practically an industry ideal. This is captured most clearly in Marc Levinson's *The Box* (2016), his history of containerization, where the shipping container is said to facilitate a smooth mobility across a world made flat by

standardization and intermodality. These boxes, of uniform size and universal carrier fittings, can be stacked upon one another with maximal efficiency, lifted and lowered by cranes at any port tooled to the standard, and conveyed by ship or by train or by lorry without any unloading of their contents. Certainly, the shipping container has played a major contribution to the logistics revolution and to capital's spatial fix more broadly, as Bonacich and Wilson (2008) argue, but there is a danger in reproducing what Martin (2013, p. 1053) calls the 'surface ideology', not least that it reinforces dominant ideas in such a way that occludes the spaces in which the spatial fix is applied, and therefore the human labour that undertakes it (see Gregson et al., 2017). The shipping container is a medium and, to borrow an idea from media philosophy (see Hill, 2024), to imagine the sea as a surface that these boxes glide across is not to think of the sea at all, much like the intimacy of a phone call must involve a forgetting of the medium and all that material distance between receivers. To imagine the smooth transmission of goods is to all too willingly accept that those goods have no stories to communicate of seas and ships as places, especially as places where humans toil at work and live precariously, aboard vast, floating warehouses. This is not to mention that it flies in the face of the turbulent and often violent trajectories of freight (see Cowen, 2014). It would be impossible to imagine the seas could ever be a surface for easy transit without first subtracting all the people and their misery from the picture. As such, Dusinberre and Wenzlhuemer (2016) argue that containerization and the dehumanization of those who work aboard ships go hand in hand.

The muteness of the cargo that moves across the surface of the ocean contrasts markedly with the communications network slung across the beds of its darkest depths. Nearly all intercontinental internet traffic is transmitted via cable, information encoded as light waves travelling through glass and carried by these submarine fibre optic lines (see Starosielski, 2015). Because they are deep under the sea, and since the sea is supposed far beyond society, the submarine data cable has facilitated a popular imaginary wherein networked communications have overcome space. Nicole Starosielski (2015, p. 5) records the telecommunication industry's idealization of the seabeds and coastal landing points as 'friction-free surfaces across which force is easily exerted, and where geographic barriers are levelled by telecommunications', providing a parallel with the ideal of their logistics counterparts. Of course, these cables are laid and maintained – and sometimes sabotaged – by people working at sea, again lost in the imaginary. And these networks are determined by market forces, with private companies reluctant to lay new routes and make novel connections, reinforcing the power dynamics of the global order and encoding it in the fabric of communication.

Undersea cables sustain the global media system that Glissant (2024, p. 175) characterizes as a series of 'flash agents', not so much connecting people as dazzling them. The reflection from the sea as mere surface dazzles the eye, concealing the deeper material connection; the reflection of identity emanating from the screen exploits that distance, lending itself too readily to violence or to its exculpation, the eye once more dazzled by the images presented to it. For Glissant, the promise of those undersea networks – namely, connection – has not been realized; a networked society has failed to be much more than a universal society, which is to say, a world suffering the imposition of western cultures and values and imperatives on all others.

The power of this imposition and of the media as flash agent is demonstrated by Europe's apparent migrant crisis, the imperative for a continent to fortify itself against the needy, and the transformation of the Mediterranean, long a closed sea, according to Glissant, into a graveyard. Achille Mbembe (2019) identifies Europe's borderization as the material and necropolitical expression of the brutality that has always underpinned the western nation-state: the violent exclusion of the other from responsibility. As Donatella Di Cesare (2020) observes, the nation-state does not

exist without its borders and the identity they enclose and so it cannot exist without the violent expulsion of the migrant into the sea. The position of the other as exterior to the popular moral universe has been achieved by various physical exteriorizations: the penal colony, the plantation, the concentration camp, now the refugee camp as a structural feature of globalization. The migrant is figured in political discourse and media representation as an object to be returned, or else warehoused. The sea, or rather the sea of the world system, assists this figuration. The sea by this measure is not a meaningful place where humans live; it is a surface for objects to move across. And then when migrants are capsized or sunk, they are merely (unwanted) cargo drifting towards the bottom, where the cables that carried their distorted image reside. Glissant's flash agents circulate a general atmosphere of fear that entrenches Mbembe's (2019, p. 3) 'societies of enmity', and the result is the defence of the Mediterranean or the English Channel as sites of exception where the deaths of migrants can be tolerated.

On 23 November 2021 a dinghy carrying 33 people embarked across the Channel for the coast of England, one of 209 small boats to make the perilous journey that month (see Taylor, 2025). In the early hours of the next day the boat began taking on water as desperate passengers rang the Dover coastguard. They were told to stop calling. Two of the passengers survived, 27 are confirmed dead and four are missing to this day. It was the single deadliest mass drowning since such small boat crossings began in 2018. In the years since this inception, the trivial number of migrants seeking refuge in the United Kingdom has been translated into a deplorable toll of death, the flash of media and political discourse reinforcing the ontological security of the nation at the expense of any response or responsibility. The old racism snarled *go home!* but as anti-migrant doxa dominates the mainstream and dazzles its populations, this old saw ultimately lacks any literalism; if the migrants come from the sea, then they can just as well be returned to the sea. Hundreds of Channel-crossing migrants have now been sent back from where they came, drowned at sea in an improper repatriation (see BBC, 2025).

A sea of misery is a certain arrangement of surfaces and depths. The waves of trade carrying containers of goods aboard hulking superliners, beleaguered logistics workers apparently faceless and abandoned within those immense floating warehouses. A seabed of cables conveying flashes of data and image, above pools of oil and troves of minerals for extraction. Between the two, a vertical expanse of water, at once fathomable in the interests of capital and indeterminate as an abyss for that which it cannot valorize, the waste of production, the unbidden migrant turned back from borders, turned over in their dinghies. A sea of misery is also a particular relation to the nation-state, beyond and between, reinforcing antagonistic identities. Doreen Massey (2005) argues that the insistence of space as a surface is a way of taming the challenge of the world. It is a way of avoiding what is beyond identity, of resisting the challenge of what is otherwise than being. Setting out on a sea arranged in this way as surfaces and depths, beyond and between nation-states, is not to encounter the other but instead, ahead, a final abyss: the hell of the same. A sea of misery is the sea figured by global capital and violent borders, by deep-rooted identity and fast-moving enmity, a sea that entrenches the dominant social order. It is the sea of the billionaire and the entrepreneur and the adventurer.

Relation

A sea of enslavement and discovery, of injurious labour and trade, of dazzling data flows and drowned migrants, is a sea whose waves always return to the same shore. As Emmanuel Levinas (2006, p. 26) would have it, the voyage 'follows the path of Ulysses whose adventure in the

world was but a return to his native island – complacency in the Same, misunderstanding of the Other'. On a sea of misery, the response to the challenges posed by the world is a flight from the world if it is only ever a return home. If another sea is possible then it would have to be a sea that laps against the riprap of the other, whose currents pull away from the shores of the same, which is to say, it would have to be a sea of relation.

Glissant (2024) contrasts the Atlantic of the Middle Passage and the closed Mediterranean with the Caribbean. His Caribbean is open to the sea and to the world, a site of enmeshed cultures and hybrid languages, a series of islands not closed off the one from the other. The Caribbean was the site of the first landings of trans-Atlantic slaves, carrying the shared memory of the abyss, home of 'the naked migrant' (Glissant, 2020, p. 5), who, arriving stripped of everything, has to find identity only in its direction towards others. This is identity not as a return to the same but as a creole of cultures. The Caribbean Sea then connects, it makes contact between (islands, languages, peoples). This is a vision of the seas not reduced to the conveyance of flash agents but instead recognized in themselves as 'relay agents' (Glissant, 2024, p. 178), as bodies that facilitate a reaching out from one to the other. Jonathan Pugh (2016) sees in the island a possibility for a relational turn in how we think of the sea and the land, one inspired by Glissant, and corrective of the humanities' historically landlocked mode of thought. The sea would then be understood as a conduit for relation, without which there can only be disconnection and discrimination and domination (readily justified as national identity and rational measurement and civilization). A sea of misery permits no connection; it is a spatial arrangement of opposites whose only identity is now their opposition to the other. To ride a sea of relation is not a mere return to the home but a venturing out into the world, a making of connections, a taking up of the problems of others. This is not to undertake an adventure but to travel out, to go over to the other, neither for the purpose of extraction nor as an imposition but of giving and as sharing.

A sea of relation is then not a surface for conveyance, nor a depth utilized as store or dump, but instead a dynamic site, unfixable, an agent of mixing and of movement towards, an infinite interaction. This remains a framing, an idealization, but it is one that holds truer than the idea of the sea as a static stage for human action. As Susan Reid (2019, p. 114) observes, the sea is the largest moving body most people will ever experience, and ought to be appreciated for its 'complex liveliness'. Surfaces and depths – the sea imagined as a passive plane or as a hold to be dipped into in – run against the intimacy of dynamic bodies, oceanic and human. The sea's powerful currents are not only lively but dangerous, such that any encounter with the sea is a going over to what is exterior and that risks the integrity and primacy of a self imagined self-contained. The idea of a fixed self or unchangeable identity is given the lie in an encounter with a vastness that is itself constantly changing. The sea changes its behaviour with the climate and the weather; depending on its temperature, it varies its salinity, its depth, its density (Campling & Colás, 2021). Those currents buffet and wear the cables laid to sustain an intercontinental transmission of data and of image, even at the bottom of the ocean (Starosielski, 2015), disrupting the said, or, the certainty of utterances, the confidence that the message can be deposited without challenge from one shore to the next. The surface-depth model of the sea is not only challenged when cables are damaged by shark bites, but also by the very human actions it is meant to prop up, as when fishing vessels accidently trawl up cables and cause outages.

The idea of a sea of relation is much more in tune with a sea of others, of connection, with sharks and other nonhuman entities, and with humans who labour or travel or sojourn with seas. The tides are a relationship between the sea and the moon. The waves between the sea and the wind. The carbon cycle is a relationship between the sea and the plants and the weathering of rocks, together

putting on an atmosphere for everything to breathe in. To acknowledge a sea of relation is not only to recognize its dynamism but to understand that it is a movement that connects, that draws closer to what is outside, to what is otherwise.

For these reasons it is important to reiterate the call from Steinberg and Peters (2015) for wet ontologies that can better understand fluid spaces. To adopt a wet ontology is to give up on stable grounds and to accept the dynamism of the world as a rebuke to its appearance as (or the imposition of) a stable surface. This holds not only for the sea, which may be the largest moving body available to human encounter, but which is not in a class of its own. The land of course moves, albeit not often as rapidly as the waves, sometimes into the sea. At the heart of a wet ontology is the idea that, although it is possible to parcel out water as surfaces and depths, to fix it in mind, this apparent neatness is ultimately exploded by the intensity of its movement and by its ungraspable magnitude. All this being said, ontology is not necessarily the first philosophy, which is to say, it is not clear that fixing an ontological position in regard of the seas is sufficient to fix a relationship to the sea, as if phenomenology or ethics would follow ipso facto. A wet ontology ought to be met with a marine phenomenology sufficient to think being otherwise than identity, beyond the misery of the sea that is a return to the same, and which would provide an understanding of how an encounter with the sea can be a moral experience that binds us to others. A marine phenomenology would be a complement to a wet ontology, giving a place to the dynamic co-construction of experience by sites and entities in relation.

How can the sea be encountered as relation, given the dominance of its miserable frame and given the magnitude with which it resists assimilation to the content of thought? Glissant argues that a trace of this sea is smuggled out in the form of cultural expression. This cry is an expression of the historic memory of the three abysses – the hold, the depth, the plantation – that binds the relation between cultures that have survived it. Blues or jazz are given as examples of this cry, as cultural forms that exhibit evolution and adaptation and connection, like the creole languages of the plantations, where difference is forced into intimacy by displacement, fusion facilitated by the orality left when written languages are prohibited. Blues or jazz are then a voice crying out to the other, to a world of contact beyond the sea of misery. Glissant excludes hip hop, defining it as more of a pidgin than a creole, since it subverts language from within rather than reaching out. But, to give an example, the sea of 'New World Water' by Yasiin Bey (formerly Mos Def) surely conveys the message, if not the trace. Bey's water carries slave ships and fills with black bodies; it is polluted and commodified; it cries out too. This water of the world system, that enriches the few and immiserates the many, contrasts with a sea of relation, which would sustain an infinite interaction of limitless cultures, moving and changing – but above all, meeting. There is ultimately nothing outside of relation; the only empty sea is a sea where relation is denied. Cultural expressions such as blues or jazz or arguably hip hop can bring us to an encounter with another possible sea.

Another trace can be found in the vast logistical movement of goods, so long as it is understood as an expression of the chaos of a world in motion and not, contra the surface ideology of the logistics industry as a perfect, omniscient systematization of movement. Interpellation into this ideology can contaminate thought's hold on contingency in the form of 'container theory' (Parker, 2013, p. 369), a lionization of the supposed homogeneity and smoothness that containerization has delivered to the conveyance of the world's things. Countering this hegemony would have to begin from an acceptance that all communication is a navigation of difference, that boxes are not transplanted immaculately from one shore to the next, just as the concept conveyed by an utterance does not arrive perfectly in the mind of another (Hill, 2024). The distance between sender and receiver

can never be collapsed; the sea cannot be a surface for a friction-free transmission of goods, without the dents and scrapes of the marine environment, of the waves and weather, or of the human labour that carries the communication across oceans. Nothing is sent unchanged. Freight accumulates its own cargo in the form of stories, stories of the journey. Anyone in an encounter with the logistical product, which is to say anyone in sight of the sea or of a railway line, anyone moved along a motorway, anyone in receipt of a parcel, is then in an encounter with the other via the trace these stories impart on the goods. This would be readily apparent if communication was understood as contact and not as a transplantation, that the recipient never receives the story wholesale but has instead to make novel connections. Communication is not so much in the message but the questioning of the dominant frame so that it might reach past and out to the other. Then, behind the container would be what it really contains: the faces of people who labour on a sea of relation, present by their absence in the form of the trace.

The migrant has a face too, more explicit than a trace, but contorted into a grimace, a threat, by a dazzling media presentation that serves to fortify the nation-state against the chaos of the world. As Di Cesare (2020) notes, no solution can be found to the migrant problem if the migrant is treated as a problem. Instead, only roiling enmity. A sea that is beyond and between nation-states will always be a sea into which the foreign is returned. Di Cesare argues for the abandonment of the view from the shore, the experiential position of looking out on the sea and its others as if removed from it all. Seen from here, the small boats of the migrants might seem like an armada, just as the superliners stacked with boxes might seem like they have glided across oceans without trouble or labour, and the shoreline might seem like it demarcates same from other. From the position of the shore the sea is beyond and between; if the sea is looked out upon from the shore, then this vantage point becomes a demand to defend advantage, to repel from the cliffs and the beaches. Di Cesare (drawing on Lucretius and Pascal) observes that such a position rests on a false confidence in the firmness of its ground. From the beach, the waves might pull a spectator in. From the cliff edge, any vantage point might be lost to the corrosive energy of the sea. From the cobbles or shingle, the ground might move and the rocks underfoot that allowed for this idea that the sea is out there might take their own migration into the ocean. The view from the shore is precarious and this precarity establishes that the sea is not looked out on from a certain territory; rather, there can be no mere spectatorship of the sea but instead only a being-with the sea, given its intimacy with the land. To look out at desperate, weathered faces, bodies massed on precarious rafts and dinghies, and to see not a threat to the nation but the possibility of deterritorialization, is to see the sea. It is a sea that suggests a different way of being in the world, just as the migrant suggests a challenge to the sovereign power that has made the world the way it is. To encounter this face of the migrant and not the flash of a grimace via a dazzling media system is to experience the necessity of hospitality and the turning outside of everything that previously guarded an interior.

This hospitality would be itself a deterritorialization. Even the solidity of the ground is an illusion borne of the human perception of time. How can identity be tethered to a land and expulsion justified by the sovereign power of a territory when that ground is as lively and as mobile as the migrant? This would be the final destination of Massey's (2005, p. 137) argument about 'immigrant rocks', the way that the geological environment is not fixed but constantly moving – continental drift, tectonic activity, the land rising with its respite from the weight of glaciers – just at a pace that escapes human experience. The sea plays its part too, carrying rocks and pebbles, eroding cliffs, shaping beaches, and sinking carbon in a relation with those weathered and migrating rocks. If the ground changes and moves in a dance with the sea, then the human need not be lashed

to specific patches of land; the human can survive deterritorialization, because the nations and the borders that currently contain the individual are already in the process of being deterritorialized. This land is not a stable condition of identity; that identity can instead be premised on an openness to its outside, just as the cliff is open to the waves.

If the sea is comparatively lively in its movement next to that of the rock, then both have been deemed all too passive when measured by the standard of human agency. The perversity of this measurement lies in its justification of a moral passivity towards entities reduced to environments, to stages for action that are not themselves loci of moral action originating from human intention. It can be argued that the immense scale and temporal breadth of geological processes are sufficient to create a sense of responsibility towards geological entities and processes, to the extent that this magnitude creates first humility in the face of something that exceeds the human and then an ecological enthusiasm for its sustainability (see Hill, 2022). If the sea is the greatest moving body that human perception can encounter (not being calibrated to detect tectonic movement or glacial flow, say), then similar could hold, that is, then the movement of the sea, not only of itself but its movement of bodies, the way it connects and makes contact, would be likewise morally moving. The movement of the sea would then not only be influenced by gravity; the sea would have its moral gravity too, a pull that establishes its seriousness as a moral entity, as a locus of responsibility. At the very least, this seriousness should establish that human responsibility with regards to the sea constitutes a recognition that the sea has its own imperative and that, as John Llewelyn (1991) suggests, it does not exist only to be taken from; if responsibility is to be a response – a movement towards, the pull of gravity – then the sea must be given to, is owed the gift of being let be. This would not be an abandonment, a renewed demarcation of the divide between the social and the marine or its reification as a buffer beyond and between nations; it would be a demand to follow the sea where it goes, which is to allow it to make relation.

A sea that does not separate facilitates encounter. To encounter the other at sea, not from the shore but from a sea of relation, a sea in which the migrant is not permitted to drown, in which marine labour is not rendered invisible, a sea of vibrancy and of life, is to recognize a relationship of responsibility. The precarious life of the other, already precarious by virtue of existence even before the risk of being terrestrial in a marine world, would then weigh heavily. The view from the shore parallels the privilege of identity wrapped up in itself. But as Levinas argues, it is a privilege that is self-defeating if it cannot open out to the other, since it would then reinforce isolation. To remain on the shore may provide an illusion of power and security but without relation there is only solitude; the individual starved of the other is virulent but ultimately alone and so incapable of acting meaningfully in the world. What good is a power that cannot effect? If it is possible to imagine oneself alone on the shore then this is already 'to possess a privileged place with regard to responsibilities for which no one can replace me and from which no one can release me' (Levinas, 2007, p. 245). The only useful power, that is, the only power the individual possesses that is not frustrated by its lack of exteriority, is to go towards the other in a movement of responsibility, to give assistance, to refuse to allow this other existence to be diminished or lost. The sea would no longer facilitate a state of exception where the migrant can be let die if it is recognized that the human is always already stepping away from the shore, already at sea, acted on and moved by it; the sea could no longer be a beyond in which the death of the other is tolerable, since it would instead be the environment ahead of a moral movement. A sea like this, a sea of relation, would be, as Levinas (2007, p. 171) says of the encounter itself, 'fundamentally pacific'.

Conclusion

Perhaps it is unsurprising that the *Titan* implosion elicited little sympathy in a world in which it is permissible to push migrants back, to capsize them, drown them. Equally, if the injuries of offshore and maritime labour are rarely brought to mind then the imagination will be unaccustomed to extending its enthusiasm out to sea. But if the backlash to billionaires and entrepreneurs and adventurers is to become more than a fragile coalescence around an idea, if it is instead to begin to bring about a change in the direction of history towards greater justice, then the immiseration of the sea must be thrown into reverse. Although it may appear merely beyond or between, dominant ideas about the sea serve dominance on land, and vice versa, to the extent that it is unhelpful to imagine any separation at all. An enthusiasm for justice would be left thwarted if the sea were to remain figured empty in an active production of symbolic misery, since this symbolism locks in subjective violence both historic and contemporary, and since it denies the community needed to effect change. Figurative misery sustains an experiential hell, surfaces and depths hiding violence and death, and all of this in service to the maintenance and expansion of the structural violence of capital. To the extent that the sea is permitted to facilitate communication, in vitriolic flashes across flattened surfaces, the message carried has been of intransigent identity. The alternative is a sea of relation, a sea that permits contact and that makes connection, that is more than surfaces and depths, that is dynamic and lively and due a greater share of moral seriousness.

Prompted starboard by the fate of the *Titan*, there are two broad conclusions to be drawn. The first is that a wet ontology is a necessary but not sufficient condition for a reimagining of the sea. A wet ontology would need to be bolstered by a marine phenomenology if the sea is to be understood as a space that is dynamic to the extent that it brings bodies together. Pugh (2016) has begun this task in earnest, arguing that a relational turn in the geographies of seas and ships and islands requires an understanding of the way that these entities are not fixed collections but instead constitute one another phenomenologically. The work of this article has been to build on this contribution by arguing that an idea of relationality must bring along with it a sense that the relationship with the sea and its others is a moral relationship if we are to adequately understand and explain the sea's dynamism, the way it laps against and brings together. A relational turn in geographies and histories and sociologies of the sea would be supplemented and extended if, in this way, the sea can be understood to be possessed of a certain moral gravity. The task for future work on seas and ships and so on is to lean into the *relational* turn to ensure that it is at the same time a *moral* turn. This would require an attentiveness to the way that the trace or cry of a world built on slavery and extraction is communicated by cultural forms such as hip hop; to the way that logistics as a form of communication itself relays its trace stories of injurious labour; and to the way that no amount of dazzle can ever fully obscure the faces of migrants that call us to respond. Above all, future work would trace the ways that the sea connects us as a relay agent of moral responsibility. This would constitute and fully establish a marine phenomenology.

The second conclusion is an extension and intervention of this conceptual work into public discourse around deaths at sea: that political enthusiasm cannot be absent moral enthusiasm if a meaningful movement towards social justice is desired. If it is possible for the loss of the *Titan* to be celebrated, then it is only because the sea has remained a sea of misery. A moral relational turn would be a vital conceptual tool to counter the media and political discourse around which lives matter at sea and to repudiate the moral relativism that would pit the lives aboard the *Titan* (or cruise ships or luxury yachts) against those of migrants. To reject the view from the shore, to instead be with the sea in recognition that it puts us in relation with the world, would

be to reject in turn the gerrymandering of moral seriousness that plays out in public discourse and which says *these lives matters and those lives do not*. If we can conceptualize the sea as a sea of relation, then we can say that all loss of life at sea is unforgiveable and the responsibility unavoidable. And if the sea were to become a sea of relation, then it would no longer be a sea that sustains the dominance of the billionaire, the entrepreneur and the adventurer in the first place.

As Glissant (2024, p. 9) writes: 'We cry our cry of poetry. Our boats are open, and we sail them for everyone'.

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