

Introduction: Cetacean Nations

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Dead body on the beach. Female. Suspected poisoning. No signs of struggle, but vaginal bleeding. Who is responsible for this crime? How will the perpetrators be punished? How do these questions shift if we read this body as “animal”? What happens, for example, if this body signifies “whale”? How much sympathy do we have? How much does she have in common with us? How significant is it that this creature is a mammal, that her breasts are only visible as nipples on either side of her vagina, that she is a beluga whale, that bladder cancer can lead to blood in urine? In Sandra Steingraber’s *Living Downstream: An Ecologist’s Personal Investigation of Cancer and the Environment* (2010), the investigation of this kind of case also reveals various assumptions about cetacean bodies more generally.¹ For Steingraber, the salient facts are industrial pollutants in watersheds that have led to cancer in beluga whales, linking them with human beings—like Steingraber—who have developed bladder cancer themselves. While the cetaceans in Steingraber’s work are linked with humans, though, they are also distinguished as animals in ways that deserve further exploration.²

Steingraber’s example opens up general questions that help to frame this special issue of *Tamkang Review* on “Cetacean Nations”: how do various humans think about nonhuman difference in the case of cetaceans? How do different

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¹ The details of beluga whale anatomy and human bladder cancer are taken from Steingraber, 134.

² Steingraber’s discussion of beluga whales is only a small part of her larger project, which explores more generally the under-studied (but very significant) relationship between toxic chemicals in the environment and cancer in humans.

human nations construct various species of whales, dolphins, and porpoises differently? How are whales treated differently, for example, depending upon the geographic boundaries of their habitats, the waters in which they live, or the land formations they might approach? Conversely, how do representations of cetaceans in literary and cultural texts reinforce or resist constructions of human gender and sexuality norms, for example, including the potentially problematic detective narrative suggested at the beginning of this introduction? Further, how do representations of cetaceans resonate differently in relation to the national contexts that produce them, or in which they are read? From Taiwan to the United States, Japan, Australia, and Canada, the cetaceans explored in this issue traverse global networks of both cultural studies and oceanic waters. Migratory patterns of cetaceans (and texts) can thus challenge claims of ownership in relation to various nations. But cetaceans can also provide an opportunity to see how the construction of “nation” itself has been built upon a logic that would render it impossible to think of a cetacean species as itself a kind of nation. Not all of the contributors to this issue would agree with that logic.

Dead whales on the beach (or on a whaling ship) can thus raise important questions about sovereignty and territoriality, while also encouraging us to think further about subjectivity and various ways of constructing both similarities and differences between human and nonhuman beings. Should the category of “mammal” (with analogous reproductive organs), for example, or “cetacean” (to be more specific), determine legal definitions of “personhood” and the right, therefore, to life, liberty, and well-being? This kind of question resonates with increasingly vehement calls for the abolition of all forms of whaling, dramatized for example in Animal Planet’s television series *Whale Wars*, which follows the efforts of the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society to disrupt Japan’s current whaling efforts. The success of this form of activism can be seen in the BBC’s recent report that Japan cut short its 2012 season of whaling (for what it calls “research” purposes), citing “sabotage campaigns” as a major problem, after catching less than a third of its quota of nine hundred whales this year (“Japan Ends Whaling Season”). Other forms of activism for cetaceans have been visible recently as well, such as the effort from PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals) to sue Sea World in San Diego for holding orcas as “slaves” (“California”). *The New York Times* maintains an online “Times Topic” on “Whales and Whaling” that tracks relevant news stories, including links to frequent articles and blogs on threats to cetaceans swimming free: from the recent stranding deaths of ninety-one whales in Australia and New Zealand, for example, to threats from the shipping industry, to problems associated with the acidification of oceans resulting from climate

change.³ The grounds for finding these threats to be problematic for cetaceans themselves are also revealed in other recent articles that celebrate the intelligence of dolphins and sperm whales, for example, or the songs of humpback whales, or the capacities for complex social structures and communication among various cetacean species.⁴

One of the goals of this special issue is to highlight scholarly work on cetaceans that responds to these recent examples, among others, drawing upon animal studies, animality studies, and cultural studies more broadly.⁵ The contributors to this issue do not suggest a consensus position, either on the moral or legal status of cetacean species, or on the most productive methodology for analyzing various national and international contexts for human-cetacean interactions. While some clearly align themselves within a tradition of animal rights that can be extended to cetaceans, others can be aligned with animality studies in their attention to the implications that human-cetacean interactions (and representations) will continue to have for human cultural politics. While these positions are not necessarily mutually exclusive, an argument that might defend indigenous rights for whaling, for example, looks very different from the perspectives of various contributors to this issue. One of the common threads, though, might be formulated as an interest in the history of human-cetacean interactions with a desire to make those encounters more meaningful, even if positions vary widely on how to determine what might be ethical or respectful. How can various constructions of cetacean species, in other words, work against indifference to the suffering and death of those creatures we identify as cetaceans?

One way to challenge indifference is to question an anthropocentric framework that resists attention to how nonhuman creatures experience the world differently from the way humans do. Sandra Steingraber's discussion of beluga whales includes a brief moment that seems open to this possibility when she thinks about whether a beluga whale would become aware of the symptoms of bladder cancer differently. Steingraber indicates that "gross hematuria, or noticeable blood in the urine" (134) is what signaled the presence of her own bladder cancer, which she first thought must have been something other than blood, wondering if it could even have been the result of eating too many sliced red beets (134). But in retrospect she not only understands the cause but also implies a link with a whale who might also not know what that kind of blood signifies, or who might perceive the blood in a different way: "I do not know how a whale

³ See "91 Stranded Whales Die"; "Dolphins to Boats"; and Gillis.

⁴ See for example Bhattacharjee, Bakalar, Angier, and Siebert.

⁵ For more on the distinction between animality studies and animal studies, see Lundblad.

would experience this—perhaps through the sense of smell” (134).

While Steingraber does not dwell upon this brief thought, she nonetheless raises the question: what is it like to be a whale?⁶ In “Western” continental philosophy, this kind of question can be linked with a long tradition of assuming that the ability to think (and to ask a question like this one) can define what it means to be human. Heidegger’s formulation of animals as “poor in world” suggests that a fundamental and constitutive boundary distinguishes humans from nonhumans, rendering nonhuman experience inevitably less important or meaningful within a hierarchical framework that assumes humans to be the only species capable of subjectivity.⁷ The late work of Jacques Derrida—which is arguably one of the most significant catalysts for the current proliferation of work in animal and animality studies—finally deconstructs this human-animal binary in complex ways. In *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, for example, Derrida dismantles the claims of human exceptionalism not only in Heidegger but also in a philosophical genealogy that runs from Descartes to Kant, Lacan, and Levinas. Rather than denying any difference between “the human” and “the animal”, Derrida argues that we should first reject this singular binary opposition that lumps all nonhuman difference into one abstract nominalization (*the* animal). The difference between a human being and a beluga whale, for example, is not necessarily the same as the difference between a human being and a lizard, or between a lizard and a whale. But the difference *among* human beings—between a “self” and an “other,” and the difference within one’s “self”—is not necessarily a fundamentally different kind of difference. There are multiple ruptures between others, in other words, rather than a singular binary, but subjectivity need not be limited exclusively to “the human.” Without that kind of hierarchy, we can more productively consider different ways of being in the world, without assuming that a beluga whale’s experience must be “poor” in comparison to the world of being human.⁸

For scholars aligned with animal studies or critical animal studies, debates remain about whether difference or commonality—or various combinations of both—should be the basis for effective animal advocacy. Some might argue that we should “speak for the voiceless,” for example, precisely because “they” are

⁶ The formulation of this question recalls Thomas Nagel’s well-known essay, “What Is It Like to Be A Bat?” (1974).

⁷ For a useful collection that includes excerpts from various philosophers on differences between the human and the animal, including Heidegger, Nietzsche, Levinas, and Derrida, among others, see Calarco and Atterton.

⁸ For a more detailed overview of Derrida’s work, as well as a good introduction to the field of animal studies, see Wolfe, “Human, All Too Human.”

different from “us”, while others might argue that we should advocate first for those nonhumans species who are most like us in terms of cognitive abilities, communication skills, social structures, and so on, apparently blurring the boundary between humans and other creatures.⁹ While this perspective might seem effective for its focus on human-like capabilities in cetaceans in order to advocate for them, it can also be seen as reinforcing a hierarchy with humans at the top, and other species granted rights according to how closely their capabilities seem to match our own.¹⁰

Essays in this special issue take on this question directly, but Steingraber’s work can also provide an example that illustrates some of the complexities involved. Steingraber seems genuinely concerned for dozens of beluga whales in the St. Lawrence River in Canada, for example, who have died in the last two decades as a result of not only bladder cancer, but also stomach, intestinal, salivary gland, breast, and ovarian cancer (135). Since “no cases of cancer have been reported in belugas inhabiting the less contaminated Arctic Ocean” (135), Steingraber focuses first on the local estuary, which “receives tributarial waters that have traversed some of the most industrialized landscapes of southern Canada and the northeastern United States” (133). But she also reveals a food chain of eels that links the whales to contaminated sites as far away as the Sargasso Sea around Bermuda in the Atlantic Ocean, where eels from “freshwater rivers in North America, Europe, and Africa all converge . . . to spawn” (136). Readers of this issue might productively consider the extent, then, to which the deaths of these whales can be linked with the carcinogenic industries of the U.S. and Canada, on the one hand, and global networks that resist categorization by nation, on the other hand.

Readers might also be interested in Steingraber’s primary focus on these deaths as evidence that environmental pollutants are likely causing similar cancers in humans too, which might suggest a different kind of concern in relation to nonhuman animals themselves. What is the goal, in other words, for finding common ground between humans and beluga whales? Steingraber tracks benzo [a] pyrene, for example, which is a “potent and well-known carcinogen” that is “created during the combustion of all kinds of organic materials from wood to gasoline to tobacco,” as well as in coal tar (137). The effects of it measured in the St. Lawrence belugas, we are told, “approached values found in laboratory animals exposed to levels of benzo [a] pyrene sufficient to cause a response in bioassays”

⁹ For more on these and other questions related to animal advocacy, see DeKoven and Lundblad.

¹⁰ For this kind of critique see, for example, Cary Wolfe, *What Is Posthumanism?*

(138). There is no particular reason that Steingraber cannot be simultaneously concerned about beluga deaths and the human deaths that can be linked to exposures to the same toxic chemicals, and it is clear that her book is focused on the latter. But she sets up her discussion of the belugas as an example of a kind of natural laboratory, in order to illustrate the value of animal testing, in a sense, to determine what might be toxic for human beings. With tens of thousands of chemicals on the market in the U.S. that have not been tested, Steingraber gives an example of how that testing would otherwise happen in a lab for a single carcinogenicity assay: it would typically involve eight hundred animals such as rats and mice; these animals would be exposed to the substance through “inhalation, ingestion, or skin application on a regular basis throughout the animals’ life spans”; and the tumor patterns that result would be tracked for two years (127-28). Presumably all the animals are then killed. Steingraber mentions other alternatives, such as human cell lines in petri dishes, as well as the obstacles at times of translating what happens in nonhumans to what might happen in humans (133). But, she argues, “Until more sensitive *in vitro* assays are developed, lab animals will continue to provide us important clues about how carcinogens ply their trade” (131). While she is “grateful for the knowledge that animals have provided us so far,” she is sorry not for their deaths but, “given how many animals were sacrificed for the data,” for the fact that “we largely failed to act on the information they provided” (130). Certainly this kind of perspective does not fit with one opposed to animal testing, on the one hand, or arguments against reinforcing hierarchies between human and nonhuman beings, on the other hand, as well as between creatures such as whales and mice.

Steingraber’s construction of animals can thus be seen as anthropocentric in ways that some contributors to this volume would find offensive, while others might see as potentially defensible, depending perhaps upon how the lab animals are treated.¹¹ Some might argue that her use of language such as “lower animals” when referring to fish, as opposed to “us higher animals” (140), reinforces a hierarchical logic that makes it easier for *any* nonhuman death to be justified, rather than mourned. To return to the opening question of this introduction, it becomes clear that in Steingraber’s view a fish or a mouse dead on the beach would be much less problematic than a whale, except in terms of proving toxic risks for humans. It also becomes clear, though, that Steingraber is willing to maintain the framework of a human being “treated like an animal” as a way to object to cruel

¹¹ For an interesting exploration of these possibilities, see Donna Haraway’s chapter, “Sharing Suffering: Instrumental Relations between Laboratory Animals and Their People, in *When Species Meet* 69-93.

treatment. For Steingraber, the experience of being a cancer patient reduces her to this state: “I examined the outline of my legs under the thin blanket, the shadow my hand cast on the sheet. Between the sheet and the blanket snaked the wretched catheter tube. I felt flattened down, *like an animal wounded by something cruel and meaningless*” (137, my emphasis). How, we might ask, do we define “cruel and meaningless”? What conditions or goals would be required to avoid that charge against animal testing in a lab? How about in different contexts such as fishing, or indigenous whaling traditions, or factory farms? When can the suffering and death of an animal be justified?

For Steingraber, the body on the beach to be most concerned about is a human’s, including ultimately her own. She crystallizes this kind of anthropocentric attitude in a dream that she relates, after she has learned that her own cancer has gone into remission:

I am walking by the ocean and discover a pale orange crab, as large as a whale, washed up on the beach. It is dying. I lie down next to it, and slowly it wraps a great, clawed arm around me. Reaching my arm over its carapaced body, I return the embrace. I am not afraid. As if in the final frame of a movie scene, giant letters appear in the sky above us, spelling out a single word—G-R-A-C-E. (139)

Granted her own reprieve from the crab that is linked with cancer, Steingraber celebrates this “embrace” of an animal—linked with whales—on the beach. But what kind of embrace is this, ultimately? To what extent should a moral judgment drive our reading of this dream as a text? What other kinds of questions should we ask when we encounter creatures like these in various kinds of texts and contexts more broadly?

The essays in this issue offer a range of possibilities for “embracing” cetaceans, pushing us to consider the implications of “cetacean nations” in everything from fictional narratives to documentary films, scientific articles, and various kinds of legal, cultural, and philosophical discourses. The first two essays provide readings of literary and cultural texts, in relation to the contexts of dolphins in Japan and a humpback whale in Taiwan. In “Species in a Planetary Frame: Eco-Cosmopolitanism, Nationalism, and *The Cove*,” Neel Ahuja explores complex questions about the possibility of an “eco-cosmopolitan” or “planetary” ethic that would take seriously critiques of both speciesism and neo-imperialism. While these two frameworks might seem incompatible, Ahuja explores them in relation to U.S. condemnations of the slaughter of dolphins in Japan as depicted in the Oscar-winning documentary film *The Cove*. Ahuja’s approach explores both nonhuman animal politics and constructions of human sovereignty, arguing that the categorical divide between “nation” and “species” needs to be questioned in order to move toward more effective eco-cosmopolitanism. In “Animal Contact in

Liu Ka-shiang's *He-lien-mo-mo the Humpback Whale*," Sun-chieh Liang provides a reading of human-cetacean interactions in a fictional text. Liang explores how the novel raises questions about both anthropomorphism and speciesism, ultimately arguing that there are ethical and political reasons to emphasize the vulnerability and shared suffering of various species, rather than continuing to uphold humanist and anthropocentric constructions of subjectivity that are limited to humans alone.

The second group of essays in this issue investigates and explores histories of human interactions with cetaceans, including current practices of hunting cetaceans by the Japanese for "scientific" purposes and by indigenous groups in Canada for "traditional" and subsistence purposes. In "Japanese Whaling and the Language of Science," Denise Russell analyzes the scientific papers produced by Japanese researchers that have been used to justify the killing of roughly a thousand whales each year. While Russell considers each paper on its own terms and recognizes that scientific research is in fact being done, she concludes that the research is flawed and ultimately contrary to the stated goals of the research programs that have been submitted to the International Whaling Commission (IWC). Marie-France Boissonneault's "Beauty and the Enchanted Beast: The Narwhal (*Monodon monoceros*) in the Canadian Cultural Landscape" offers an attempt to defend the rights of indigenous hunting on the basis of tradition. While this position is criticized by others in this special issue, Boissonneault insists upon the importance of the narwhal in the Canadian cultural imaginary, including a tradition of hunting it, while also pointing out how this cetacean has been threatened by environmental degradation, on the one hand, and by modern hunting practices that diverge from traditional values, on the other hand.

The final essay in this issue is a manifesto for whales' rights by Paola Cavalieri, who has previously made strong and influential arguments for species such as nonhuman primates.¹² Unconvinced by arguments in defense of whaling on the grounds of tradition, or resistance to neo-imperialism, or critiques of rights-based advocacy, Cavalieri develops a clear case for granting legal rights to whales in "Declaring Whales' Rights." Pointing out that "tradition" has been used historically to defend such abhorrent human practices as slavery, Cavalieri argues that extending rights to whales can be seen as the logical next step in relation to the history of extending rights to various human groups. Citing recent research on whales, Cavalieri suggests that whales can logically be included in the category of "persons", with complex forms of self-consciousness, social relations, and even

¹² See, for example, Cavalieri and Singer.

“culture.” From this perspective, the mass killing of whales can be viewed as a “genocidal practice.” The various contributors to this special issue on “Cetacean Nations” thus offer a wide range of positions on how we should respond to cetaceans, whether in terms of physical interactions or in terms of responses to literary and cultural representations of them. Without question, though, there continue to be dead bodies on the beach. How will you respond?

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