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“Killer” Metaphors and the Wisdom of Captive Orcas

Julie “Madrone” Kalil Schutten and Caitlyn Burford

This entry distinguishes captive orcas from their wilder and freer kin. We speculate that captive orcas embody three principle metaphors: Prisoner; Activist; Martyr. These metaphors help us to imagine the kinds of rhetorical thinking necessary for a deeper understanding of the costs of human behavior as well as the potential for creating new visions and modes of witnessing. By witnessing orcas-as-prisoners, humans begin to see marine parks anew, as prisons, understanding their own complicity in the imprisonment of animal activists. Captive orca metaphors help to convey the actions of other-than-humans as rhetorically salient and politically motivated.

Keywords: *alternative symbolics, animal activism, animal communication, captivity, orca*

There’s about as much educational benefit studying dolphins in captivity as there would be in studying mankind [sic] by only observing prisoners held in solitary.

—Jacques Cousteau; quoted in Lawrence Baker, *Animal Rights and Welfare: A Documentary and Reference Guide*

Operator: Orange County Sheriff’s Office

Caller: We need a — response for a dead person at SeaWorld.

A whale has eaten one of the trainers.

Operator: A whale ate one of the trainers?

Caller: That’s correct.

—911 call in *Blackfish* (2013)

The above quote from marine biologist Jacques Cousteau and the transcript from a 911 call made after SeaWorld trainer Dawn Brancheau was killed by a captive orca illustrate the limitations and the dangers of uncomplicated spectatorship. Such a spectatorship includes using education to justify captivity and exacerbates the dangers that might otherwise go unnoticed when seeing whales as merely killers to be

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imprisoned. In what follows, we hope to shift how we might see “killer acts,” in order to foreground important metaphors that surface and warnings that reveal the consequences of narrow, zootropic views of other-than-human entities. Paralleling Tema Milstein’s linguistic imaginary, we advance visions of “zoo’d” orcas in which human spectators are implicit agents of captivity (179). As spectators of captive creatures, our witnessing of orcas-as-prisoners should alter our view of marine parks, and position humans in the complicit role of captor.

Captivity is often propped up by justifying educational benefits with narratives about zoos that emphasize the importance of conservation and make confinement necessary for human interaction with other-than-humans. This educational rationale presents a conundrum: it asks us to suspend morality—to justify captivity for the sake of education. As part of the metaphorical transformation that catalyzes a different mode of spectatorship, former SeaWorld senior orca trainer John Hargrove writes:

Imagine the situation [captivity] in human terms and the closest institutions that come to mind is a prison, where the inmates are completely dependent on the guards and the system to provide them with the basic needs of life: food and water. It is a terrifying and depressing metaphor for trainers who love the whales and who feel responsible for them. Why? Even in the analogy, even if the prisoner-whale decides that it likes some of the guards better than others, in the end, they are all still guards, part of the same system that oppresses them. (77)

The “terrifying and depressing metaphor” emphasizes how captive orcas (and by extension captive animals at large) generate their own rhetorical sensibility toward the material conditions of captivity that can be observed by humans. Hargrove’s analogy necessitates that humans see the world through a prism of interrelations among species. But that recognition also constitutes an enclosure where humans must see themselves as spectators who are culpable in what is ultimately an orca prison. By taking up the prisoner metaphor, and viewing trainers and employees as prison guards, audiences (e.g., tourists, spectators, park visitors) become implicated in a marine prison complex.

The metaphorical turn toward seeing orcas as imprisoned also situates spectators as witnesses in collusion with political dissidents attempting to advocate for release. However, a shift in metaphor might help us see the situation differently, as a morality tale/tail about the “casual ease” with which we accept captivity and imprisonment (Zimmermann, “Tilikum”). Imprisonment has disrupted instinctual behaviors. For example, captives cannot swim one hundred miles a day, breed and care for their young, socialize in kinship communities, play freely, hunt at will, or die of old age as they would in the wild. Humans have reported on these behaviors in zoological studies of orcas for decades. Before that, collections known as bestiaries recounted fables and myths depicting human encounters with wild orcas at sea. Our entry in this bestiary takes this opportunity to demonstrate how captive orcas have been transformed into something else, by way of adapting to the confines of holding tanks

and underwater concrete cells. The captive orca laments his or her imprisonment and the outcome should haunt us.

The orca, as a herald of caution, has been recorded through lore spanning across cultures in the Pacific Northwest, across the South American coast, and comprising the subject of many a sea shanty. Named blackfish, killer whale, and *Orcinus*, the orca stands as a metaphor of the tension between gentleness and terror. Mysterious creatures diving into the deep and surfacing from the enigmatic abyss, whales were viewed as difficult to see, track, and document. The orca remains an elusive creature. Captivated seafarers encountered the mysterious beasts and conceived of stories to make sense of what they had seen. T. H. White’s English translation of *The Bestiary: A Book of Beasts* describes an unlucky band of sailors who come across a resting whale and mistake it for an island. They anchor their ships, land on the whale, and begin to build a fire to prepare dinner. “But the Whale, feeling the hotness of the fire, suddenly plunge[s] down into the depth of the deep and pull[s] down the anchored ship with it into the profound” (White 197).

Such storytelling helps to shape mythic images, visions that are embedded in metaphorical ways of knowing orcas. And as Robert L. Ivie and Oscar Giner remind us, “metaphors are myths in miniature” (302). “Metaphor functions mythically,” Ivie explains, “to rearticulate relations of meaning, . . . thereby exerci[sing] a human will to power by reordering political relations” (170). The prisoner orca metaphor rearticulates and reorders relationships between other-than-humans and human spectators, transforming orcas into not only prisoners but also political actors (Burford and Schutten). This metaphor expands the possibilities of knowing, breaching out from scientific classifications and boundaries, encouraging us to think differently about other-than-human creatures—specifically those living in captivity.

While we may never fully know what animals in captivity are communicating, or if their behaviors are simply an instinctual response to their surroundings, the divergent, even fantastic metaphorical visions of orca behaviors permit us to see these prisoners as part of a larger citizenry. When participating in a marine show with captive orcas, the audience has an opportunity to encounter orca captivity in more fluid ways, prompting polysemic visions. These visions unfold in three primary metaphors: Prisoner, Activist, and Martyr. Metaphors help us to imagine the kinds of wisdom necessary to understand the costs of human behavior and the potentials of creating new visions and modes of witnessing.

Prisoner Metaphor

Blackfish, a 2013 documentary that chronicles the plight of orca whales in captivity, inspires a distinctive ability to see orcas as prisoners. The film glimpses into the orca Tilikum’s early life, while imprisoned at Sealand park in Canada. From interviews

with the Sealand owner and a former trainer, we learn that overseers would withhold food to coerce him and others into holding cells and only when they complied would they receive food. The film recounts how Tilikum spends 5 p.m. to 7 a.m. in a small, dark, module cell in close proximity to two female orca cell mates, with whom he is imprisoned and who “rake” him (scrape their teeth on his flesh) in the night. Orcas in captivity often “bully” each other to establish a pecking order by forms of aggression, such as raking, biting, and ramming (Williams). *Blackfish* offers viewers partial perspectives of the whale-prisoner and provides an opportunity to recognize their captivity. The prisoner metaphor in *Blackfish* sets the scene, but what gets pushed to the background is Tilikum’s own agency and capacity for rhetorical action. Foregrounding Tilikum’s agency and rhetorical capacities requires an additional metaphorical layer.

Activist Metaphor

Viewing orcas as activists cultivates visions of deliberate rhetorical acts generated through prisoner behavior that comes before verbal and textual utterances (Kennedy). “It seems clear,” George A. Kennedy writes, “that rhetorical energy is not found only in language. It is present also in physical actions, facial expressions, and signs generally . . . [R]hetoric is prior to speech” (3–4). In line with Kennedy, many environmental communication scholars have argued for an alternative symbolic that does not necessarily rely on verbal or textual constructs (Peterson, Peterson, and Peterson; Rogers; Salvador and Clarke; Schutten and Rogers). Through alternative symbolics, other-than-humans are able to assert themselves as advocates. In expanding the prisoner metaphor with activist inflections, orcas become “political.” These cetaceans emerge as activists amid ongoing environmental social movements, and can even participate as catalysts for environmentalism itself (Burford and Schutten).

If activist orca actions are intended to communicate a political injustice to their captors, what would it look like to take an activist orca rhetoric seriously and to acknowledge these beings as rhetorical actors that shape public policy impacting environmental social movements? Granted, this metaphorical rendering is anthropomorphic. However, even if this is the case, the goal is “not to escape symbolism, but to promote and nurture *different* modes of symbolic activity” that embrace both “nature” (the other-than-human) and the natural dimensions of human cultural and communicative existence (Rogers 268, emphasis in the original). The activist metaphor allows for orcas to be seen as just and moral creatures who rearticulate and reshape power relations between human and other-than-human animals.

Activist orca rhetoric is intentional, deliberately orchestrated to communicate resistance rendering them not just prisoners but political prisoners. As political prisoners, they exercise deliberate judgment. For example, Kasatka, a five thousand-pound orca, repeatedly seized SeaWorld trainer Ken Peters by the leg and pulled him underwater during a live show:

[Kasatka] dragged him to the bottom of the pool. And held him at the bottom. Let him go. Picked him up. Took him down again. And these periods he was taken down were pretty close to the mark. You know, minute. Minute twenty. Presumably Ken Peters had a relationship with this whale. (*Blackfish*)

This example demonstrates how Kasatka, whom we now read as a political prisoner, enacts this deliberate, calculated resistance against her oppressors. That Kasatka chose to attack Ken Peters, one of her trainers for many years, reveals this disturbing intentionality. To be blunt, orca activist rhetoric has some teeth to it. It cuts. It takes hold. Some would say it’s nothing but instinct. Yet to interpret these violent actions as “accidents” or instinctual behaviors, rather than deliberate actions, forecloses the possibilities for witnessing resistance by captives.

We know based on studies such as one conducted by the Whale and Dolphin Conservation Society, that these behaviors rarely happen in the ocean (Williams). Former marine park employee, Suzanne Allee, comments on how captive orca aggression exposes how trainers interpret orca communication as an evolutionary response, thereby ignoring the (rhetorical) significance behind these social acts (Zimmermann, “Blood”). Comparing orcas in captivity to orcas in the ocean, then, is a false analogy that commonly results in silencing captive orca activism.

Martyr Metaphor

Despite activists’ attempts to gain our attention, they inevitably fall away from our gaze. Looking to the past, we can take captive orcas seriously by considering the legacy of orca martyrs. Remember Shamu—SeaWorld’s beloved and iconic entertainment attraction. Shamu’s body fell from the public’s gaze in 1971, but the name lived on. Despite performing tricks as a “Shamu” for several years, Tilikum himself was banished from the main stage after taking the life of Dawn Brancheau on February 24, 2010. While no longer donning the symbolic mantle of “Shamu,” Tilikum, still a prisoner of SeaWorld, materially embodies a martyr following his recent death in January 2017. We should interpret his passing after thirty-three years spent in captivity, much like Tim Zimmermann does, as politically inflected martyrdom:

Instead of the iconic, happy killer whale celebrated by SeaWorld and its fans for five decades, Tilikum demanded the world confront his reality, Shamu’s reality, which involved separation from family, confinement, boredom, chronic disease, aggression among marine park killer whales, and aggression against trainers. (“Tilikum”)

In death, a political activist metaphor encourages us to plunge into the deep with Tilikum as he commits the ultimate rhetorical act of becoming a martyr for his cause.

Many social movements have been propelled by the sacrifice of a martyr. As Deborah Cox Callister claims, “the bodies of beached whales” serve as “tragic, unpleasant and material alarm systems that call attention to the accelerating degradation of ocean life and planetary life systems” (42). Tilikum’s body and his death help to amplify this “alarm,” calling attention to the consequences of using other-than-humans for entertainment and disregarding animal life. His lifeless body became a final performance of environmental activism that constitutes a site for reflection and mourning. Before Tilikum’s death Tim Zimmermann envisions the impact of Tilikum’s legacy and what the orca’s death should signify, eulogizing:

When Tilikum dies he will leave us with something extremely precious, something to redeem his impoverished life in captivity: a desire to give greater moral consideration to other species on our planet, and to re-think the casual ease with which we seek to use nature and all things wild for human purposes. We desperately needed that. For me, that will be Tilikum’s truest and most meaningful legacy. (“Tilikum”)

Zimmermann presents an essential moral question that emerges from the prison metaphor. Humans should heed the warning not to act with “casual ease” with regard to the imprisonment of “all things wild.” The martyr metaphor compels us to envision Tilikum’s actions (and death) as a call to join the cause of all beasts in captivity. Through his absence, we bear witness to the presence of other-than-human martyrs who still call out from tanks, cages, aquaria, pens, and behind bars.

(A)Wake for Martyrs

It’s only fitting that we remember to celebrate lives lost for a noble cause. Orca bodies wash away, but their metaphors leave us with the symbolic material to act in solidarity with prisoners fighting for liberation. As we do so, let us not forget that we must bear witness to the consequences of our own hubris and our war on the oceans. Tilikum and his fellow activists are collateral losses in this oceanic hostage crisis, which has left us with many casualties and political prisoners. Keeping vigil, our sights are set on a future that no longer requires these metaphors of captivity because just as there are prisoners, there are captors, and the casualties fall on both sides.

The death of Dawn Brancheau represents a breakdown in what is typically thought of as a predator/prey relationship. We are awakened to the brutal realities captivity has wrought. The exchange that opens our entry features a 911 call where the caller explains that Brancheau had been “eaten.” Her death was a tragedy that cannot easily be put into words, so we typically revert to the language of “natural” consumption—predators consuming their prey. It’s clear why the 911 exchange construes Dawn Brancheau as having been “eaten” by an orca (Burford and Schutten). But our job now is to understand the actions of other-than-humans, like Tilikum, as something more profound, something rhetorically salient, something politically

motivated. What spectators at SeaWorld witnessed on that fateful day in February was not a “killer” whale at feeding time, but rather, according to the logic of prisoner-activist-martyr metaphors, they should have seen an imprisoned orca attempting a jailbreak, taunting his captors, and demanding liberation.

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