



# Internatural Activists and the “Blackfish Effect”: Contemplating Captive Orcas’ Protest Rhetoric through a Coherence Frame

Caitlyn Burford\* and Julie “Madrone” Kalil Schutten\*

Communication, Northern Arizona University, Flagstaff, AZ, USA

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### \*Correspondence:

Caitlyn Burford  
caitlyn.burford@nau.edu;  
Julie “Madrone” Kalil Schutten  
julie.schutten@nau.edu

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The documentary film *Blackfish* (2013; [www.blackfishmovie.com](http://www.blackfishmovie.com)) follows Tilikum, a captive SeaWorld prisoner-orca responsible for the death of trainer Dawn Brancheau and two others. The film has had a profound effect on public perceptions of orca captivity creating the “Blackfish Effect.” Our critical analysis of the film engages Plec’s (2013) internatural communication categories of *complicity*, *implication*, and *coherence*. We argue that the film illustrates the flawed hierarchy within the binary/dualistic system. In deconstructing a dualism, we must recognize the physical power and actions of captive orcas that could be seen as a form of protest rhetoric. The case example of orcas in captivity as a whole illustrates that regarding orcas as unique actors with intelligible behaviors offers a way of understanding how to listen to the more-than-human world. Our article has been one attempt to illustrate how captive orcas can be heard as extra-human citizens who participate, and even instigate, policy making.

**Keywords:** alternative symbolics, internatural communication, blackfish effect, social movements, whales

Arguably one of the most impactful and successful documentary films, *Blackfish* fundamentally contributed to the elimination of SeaWorld’s breeding program in less than 3 years. In a National Public Radio interview on March 17, 2016, SeaWorld President and CEO Joel Mamy collaborated with the Humane Society of the United States after just 10 months of working for the company to announce that SeaWorld had agreed to stop breeding orcas in captivity and would be phasing out all orca performances by 2019 (SeaWorld to End Orca Breeding Program in Partnership with the Humane Society, 2016). The protagonist of *Blackfish* is Tilikum, a 12,000-pound bull orca who has been held captive for the past 29 years in SeaWorld Orlando. Responsible for the deaths of three people, his most recent victim was Dawn Brancheau, an experienced SeaWorld trainer, who was killed in February of 2010. In the film, her death is presented as a human tragedy that could have been prevented by not subjecting the whale to the cruelty of confinement in the first place (Chang, 2013, para. 2). CNN broadcast *Blackfish* in 2013 and 6 months after airing it had been watched by roughly 25 million viewers (Kaufman, 2014). Sparking a subset of the environmental justice movement informally dubbed the “Blackfish Effect,” the film surprised many with its significant impact on SeaWorld’s revenues, stock value, and most recently, its breeding program. Perhaps even more importantly, the film has had a profound effect on public perceptions of captivity, orca health as an apex predator, and related environmental issues. Unlike other “more-than-human” (Abram, 1996) animal documentaries, the “Blackfish Effect” has been sustained through social media sites like Facebook and Twitter and has continued to draw support. The “Blackfish Effect” emerged through a multi-platform social media reaction as a colloquial term to categorize the many forms of responses to the film. These responses included but were not limited to memes, policy changes, and protests.

In what follows, we discuss the film and the “Blackfish Effect” thematically through an “internatural communication” (Plec, 2013) lens. We view the “Blackfish Effect” and the film *Blackfish* simultaneously, recognizing that the two are linked in a mediated process as the “Blackfish Effect” is an extension of the film itself. In *Perspectives on Human-Animal Communication*, editor Emily Plec (2013) defines internatural communication as “the exchange of intentional energy between humans and other animals as well as communication among animals and other forms of life” (p. 6). Internatural communication is intended to be inclusive of previous terms used in environmental communication (e.g., biorhetoric, transhuman communication, and corporeal rhetoric) but seeks to expand and embrace new understandings of human and more-than-human dialogs. In addition, we deliberately shift between terms like extra-human (Peterson et al., 2007), other-than-human, and more-than-human (Abram, 1996). While “extra-human” may imply human plus, “more-than-human” incorporates a hierarchy that reverses the current paradigm of humans over animals. “Other-than-human” (perhaps closest to “non-human”) indicates entities as different-than-human and can be read as lacking/negative, and we use it strategically only when referencing beings forced into subordination or discussing humans exercising power over animals.

Plec’s (2013) anthology is organized around three ideas/categories: complicity, implication, and coherence. Complicity looks at how humans exercise power over other-than-human entities. Implication asks humans to reflect and re-engage in a new relationship with the more-than-human world. Coherence explores the shift to a new paradigm where interconnection and cyclical/systems thinking becomes the norm. These categories are an organizing structure for her book; however, we use these ideas methodologically to build a coherence framework *via* our case study and analysis of *Blackfish* and the “Blackfish Effect.” Because this documentary has had such a profound effect, it is imperative for environmental activists and policymakers alike to understand what makes this film stand out from other environmental documentaries and how it may offer a prescriptive framework for environmental activists. We argue that the film illustrates the flawed hierarchy within the binary/dualistic system. This happens by dismantling the ideas of “power-over” (i.e., humans having power over other-than-humans) because the case of Tilikum and his respective murders proves the impossibility of the “power-over” ideology. Breaking down a dualism is not just a matter of symbolic interpretation but of material recognition, as *Blackfish* reveals. Put differently, deconstructing a dualism is not simply about a moral construction but must be a recognition of the physical power and actions of captive orcas and could be seen as a form of protest rhetoric. We argue that the case study of orcas in captivity as a whole illustrates systems thinking versus dualistic models, which in turn shows coherence as a way to “hear” internatural communication.

Our methodological approach to viewing the film uses a thematic analysis to draw out salient narratives. While we engage in textual analysis, we also understand that we are audience members/consumers affected by the film. In short, it is important to remember that critics have assumptions that they cannot easily separate from their frame of reference when exploring texts. As

such, we attempted to be self-reflective throughout the writing of this essay by continually returning to Plec’s frames for our analysis. Through Plec’s above categories, we explore how these frames are expressed in the documentary. First, complicity is shown in the film by illustrating that SeaWorld depicts orcas in captivity as either happy or necessary for scientific research. Furthermore, publics who attend SeaWorld theme parks are also part of the complicity narrative. Second, through the lens of implication, *Blackfish* critiques SeaWorld’s dominant position by proposing an alternative narrative of psychosis, which argues that Tilikum’s outbursts and neurosis (e.g., killing, grinding/breaking teeth on the cage bars) are symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder perpetrated by his prison-like living conditions. Finally, the third lens brings to light a new paradigm of internatural communication where Tilikum and other captive orcas are seen as their own agents and as such, their voices and actions would be heard as a clear choice to be freed (sea pens, release to the wild, etc.). We argue that the shift to coherence is what contributes to the “Blackfish Effect” or a sustained movement demanding the release of Tilikum and others like him. Using this lens, his homicidal acts are not a symptom of psychosis that can be fixed with, for example, a larger and more visually pleasing pen (as proposed by SeaWorld). Rather, Tilikum’s actions disrupt complicity and implication and can be read as a “symbolic declaration of war” (Milstein, 2013, p. 177), creating a breach that bridges the divide of human/orca communication by illustrating alternative symbolics (Schutten and Rogers, 2011). Our paper expands internatural communication dialogs by illustrating how to recognize new symbol systems *via* the public screen (DeLuca and Peebles, 2002) by placing equal value on more-than-human “voices” in anti-captivity rhetoric even when the “symbols” are not linguistic.

## **BLACKFISH, THE “BLACKFISH EFFECT,” AND DOCUMENTARY FILM AS CONNECTIVE ACTION**

*Blackfish*, directed by Gabriela Cowperthwaite, was shown at the Sundance Film Festival in 2012 and acquired by Magnolia Pictures and CNN Films. Due to their global charismatic megafauna status, Milstein (2009) refers to orcas as “boundary creatures,” which symbolize a “potentially enlightened and harmonious humanature” (p. 97) where “tourists” or audience members often leave an encounter with a sense of connection and, potentially, leave as an advocate for new “ecocultural alliances” (p. 97). Seen in this light, *Blackfish* from its inception presented engaging subject matter that would appeal to a large audience. It is also widely understood that popular nature documentaries typically focus on environmental use-value that specifically “encode and (re)code anything back into the logic of capitalism” (McHendry, 2012, p. 145). Framing nature in terms of its use-value maintains the subject (human)/object (nature) binary. As such, it becomes even more important to examine media texts that challenge ideologies that do not constitute nature as a resource for human use (Schutten, 2006, 2008).

Nature documentaries as a genre have the potential to encourage pro-environmental behavior. Documentaries allow for more

accessible exposure to many types of nature encounters in a way that is less expensive, less time consuming, and more readily available as compared to zoos or other direct nature experiences (Arendt and Matthes, 2016). Similarly, Pezzullo (2007) writes “the use of documentaries by social movements to “mobilize viewers” with “a committed eye” positions them as desirable and potentially efficacious modes of communication that are relatively more affordable to circulate with broader audiences” (pp. 144–145). *Blackfish* presents a perspective of reality that can be “perceived to be an expansion of human vision, a means of entering into a world that was invisible to the human eye...” (Horak, 2006, p. 459). The film splices together scenes of Tilikum’s perceived reality and other orcas, unveiling a much different picture than what entertainment parks portray publicly.

Scholars have argued that nature documentaries contribute to environmental knowledge gain and attitude change (Holbert et al., 2003; Barbas et al., 2009). In the instance of *Blackfish*, nature documentaries emphasizing cetaceans may contribute to increased knowledge about whales and whale habitat despite the central foci being on captive whales. However, does this heightened knowledge translate into pro-environmental action? Arendt and Matthes (2016) examine how a mediated nature experience such as a documentary could have a positive influence on an audience’s environmental behaviors, including increased giving behavior. We extend their work, claiming that financial donation might not be the only measure of public participation but adding that social media participation or “e-tactics” (Katz-Kimchi and Manosevitch, 2015) could also be viewed as a form of direct action and pro-environmental behavior. In this way, documentary film and other forms of media that potentially offer audiences alternative structures of meaning for understanding their internatural relationship become part of an ongoing sustained environmental justice movement such as the “Blackfish Effect.” As the Oceanic Preservation Society (OPS) wrote in a meme, “A film can be the most powerful weapon in the world—a weapon of mass construction.”

In looking at how texts influenced the “Blackfish Effect” and participated in the environmental justice movement, it is first helpful to define environmental justice. Bullard writes “the goal of an environmental justice framework is to make environmental protection more democratic. More importantly, it brings to the surface the ethical and political questions of ‘who gets what, why, and in what amount’” [as cited in Pezzullo (2001), p. 2]. Environmental justice frameworks illustrate the need for public participation in order to further democratic processes and highlight marginalized groups and their lack of access to such processes. To this end, Pezzullo (2001) writes that environmental communication must continue to focus on citizen participation in environmental/political decision-making. While environmental justice cases have historically focused on human-centric issues, our study extends the umbrella of citizen to include more-than-human “voices.”

In *Blackfish*, there are multiple discourses surrounding the murder of Dawn Brancheau. SeaWorld has gone on record placing blame on Brancheau for making various mistakes during the performance (e.g., having a her hair in a ponytail) and in turn, continues to defend the imprisonment of Tilikum and other

orcas. Alternative narratives from trainers and other experts in the film posit that the events were not Brancheau’s fault but rather caused by Tilikum’s psychosis due to his captivity. While oppositional, both narratives from the film are similar in that they ignore Tilikum’s agency and mitigate his ability to act with intention. Despite these narratives, the audience is repeatedly asked to witness the esthetically disturbing stories of three visceral murders by Tilikum and several attacks by captive orcas.

There are moments in the film that breach normative discursive narratives of human-orca communication. For example, the film dispels the potential misconception that orcas, culturally labeled “killer whales,” are not actually killers of humans in the wild. In fact, the only incidents of attack and killing on record have been by orcas in captivity. An audience’s consciousness can shift to acknowledge that orcas are not “killers” of humans in the wild, but become “killers” due to imprisonment. These breaches of perception can be seen as moments of audience identification with captive orcas where witnessing is in motion. In discussing witnessing as a rhetorical practice, Pezzullo (2007) writes, “Rather than maintaining a distance gaze through which we ignore atrocities, witnessing suggests the need to explore ‘what we are trained to overlook.’ In this act of seeing, the witness risks identification with the fate of other people, places, and events” (p. 147). Expanding on Pezzullo’s study exploring people, places, and events related to witnessing, Schutten (2011) writes “a truly inclusive biospheric literacy must include the pain of other-than-humans as well as humans. Our imagined communities must go beyond human-centered epistemologies and injustices and be able to comprehend the cries of the concrete, material earth that surrounds us” (p. 347). To this end, witnessing does not end at the visual but includes embodied experiences for both human and more-than-human entities. The witness not only sees but also feels embodied pain that allows for identification with the subject. *Blackfish* utilizes this rhetorical strategy telling the story of Tilikum and evoking embodied experiences that often activate empathy and contribute to an alternative perspective highlighting the consequences of captivity.

This act of witnessing may cause what Milstein and Krøløkke (2012) refer to as a rupture. Ruptures could illustrate how “communicative moments (in the film) might point us to new understandings about the intersections of nature, culture, and the body” (p. 83). In reference to these ruptures, we have chosen to model our language after a whale/orca term, “breach,” in an effort to have our language mirror more-than-human behavior. These breaches might create “boundary transgressing moments” (Milstein and Krøløkke, 2012) of witness for the audience moving them from complicity into implication and eventually toward coherence, as we will discuss later. It is the move into coherence that we argue has sustained the movement and created the “Blackfish Effect.”

Since the broadcast of *Blackfish*, continued public pressure has instigated several blows to SeaWorld. On the legislative end, new policies have been proposed such as the Orca Welfare and Safety Act in San Diego, California, which would make it illegal to “hold in captivity, or use, a wild-caught or captive-bred orca for performance or entertainment purposes” (Kirby, 2014). In addition to policy change, the film has also initiated grassroots responses to, and boycotts of, the SeaWorld Corporation. The company has felt

the effects of consumer losses in lost revenues each consecutive quarter since the film's release. According to a public press release from SeaWorld Entertainment, Inc., there were one million fewer visitors to the park in 2014 than 2013, and yearly revenue dropped by over 80 million dollars (SeaWorld Entertainment, Inc., 2015). Since *Blackfish* was released in 2013, SeaWorld's stock prices have plummeted over 50 percent and continue to fall (Udland, 2014, para. 7). Further threatening the corporation's public financial health is a class action lawsuit lead by investor Lou Baker claiming the company failed to inform investors about the potential impact of the documentary and the park practices brought to light in the film (Enlow, 2014, para. 7).

These consumer losses can be linked to the prevalence of social media and public participation. This aspect of the "Blackfish Effect" has significantly contributed to the public relations crisis SeaWorld has faced since the release and widespread viewing of the film on CNN. The film sparked an online social media presence including collaborative efforts between *Blackfish's* Facebook fan page, The OPS, People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA), the film *Racing to Extinction's* Facebook page, Cetacean Inspiration, Ric O'Barry's Dolphin Project, and more that are continually growing and evolving. Discussing the effect of Internet memes as delegitimizing discourse to corporate credibility, Davis et al. (2015) writes, "Social media, memes, online cultural play, and the ease of sharing have all made quick responses to corporate actions and policy easier with a higher potential for potency and resonance" (p. 19). The Internet becomes a "great equalizer" that allows environmental justice organizations with limited resources to delegitimize corporate responses (Davis et al., 2015). In this way, following Katz-Kimchi and Manosevitch (2015), we can see new social movement actors, often critiqued for passive observation, engaging as active participants in a multitude of environmental conversations via "e-tactics." E-tactics are defined as mobilizing structures that "provide users quick, easy, and familiar means to actively support the campaign" (Katz-Kimchi and Manosevitch, 2015, pp. 258–259). For example, the ability to "like," "share," and "re-tweet" are forms of active participation.

## COMPLICITY AND IMPLICATION IN *BLACKFISH*

As a corporation, SeaWorld has a vested interest in maintaining its audience's participation in complicity. The captivity model props up human interest/entertainment and financial investments as a legitimizing rationale for the subordination of other-than-human animals. To this end, in the film (and trailer), we hear a former trainer say "the industry has a vested interest in spinning these (incidents/attacks). It sells a lot of Shamu dolls, sells a lot of tickets at the gate" (*Blackfish*). The first justification SeaWorld makes is that they are leading innovators in oceanic animal conservation, reinforcing, and justifying the binary/dualism of humans over other-than-humans for purposes of human education. The second justification SeaWorld perpetuates, according to the film, is that any error is not due to the effects of captivity or the animals being "out of control" but rather individual trainer error. SeaWorld rhetorically removes the orca's involvement from the situation,

protecting their investment, claiming that the trainer "drowned," or in the case of Brancheau, they first said that she "slipped and fell" and later claimed that it was her ponytail that caused Tilikum to murder her. The next defensive tactic the film critiques is that SeaWorld highlights the trainer's mistakes: "He was supposed to get off the whale" (*Blackfish*). SeaWorld defends its legitimacy as a company by stating that in the case of the murder of Alex Martinez at Spain's Loro Parque ("Parrot Park"), there was an "accident" and "nothing we could do," despite autopsy evidence showing this incident as a "brutal attack" (*Blackfish*), as shown by the compression fractures, bite marks, and tears to vital organs.

In addition to showing how SeaWorld claims to be a force in environmental education and that large mammal incidents were "accidents," the film also shows that SeaWorld had multiple "scripts" or narratives that they instructed their trainers and employees to recite. In this sense, the film illustrates that trainers feel some responsibility for remaining complicit. For example, one trainer interviewed in the film confessed that she was embarrassed by what she had to say to tourists in the park and as a part of the orca show. She remembered parts of her script like: "Namu is doing that because she wants to, not because she has to." Other examples from the film include discussion of orca whale mortality rates in captivity. The film shows clips of three SeaWorld employees saying that orca lifespans in captivity are 25–35 years and longer than those in the wild, and one trainer is filmed saying, "They're documented in the wild living to be about 35, mid-thirties. They tend to live a lot longer in this environment because they have all of the veterinary care" (*Blackfish*). Orca researcher and producer of *Blackfish*, Howard Garrett claims this is not true. In an interview during the film, he responds by saying, "And of course that's false. We knew by 1980 after half a dozen years of research that they live equivalent to human life spans, and every other potentially embarrassing fact is twisted and turned and denied one way or another." He explains SeaWorld's script, stating: "because the whales in their pools die young, they like to say that all orcas die at 25–30 years" (*Blackfish*).

In these examples, attempts are made by SeaWorld and its employees to dismiss the artificial boundaries put in place by captivity. This framing follows what Milstein (2013) found in her study of "zoo'd" gorillas where they were positioned as agents that choose, enjoy, or benefit from captivity rather than "unconsenting captives and victims of unsustainable global human practices" (p. 178). She goes on: "A slave-master narrative is evidenced throughout the guide's discursive reframing: why would they want to leave? We're nice to them, give them a nice space, feed them, etc." (p. 178). The tour guides Milstein studied at the zoo are akin to the trainers and other employees at SeaWorld.

The film clips of the tour guides/SeaWorld staff justifying captivity are juxtaposed to follow-up interviews with trainers who appear to feel remorseful, embarrassed, sad, and guilty about their part in keeping up SeaWorld's "front of the house" performance. The film makes clear that the trainers now know how much they bought into what SeaWorld told them. It is at this point that the film shifts from illustrating examples of complicity to implication. Implication is defined by Plec (2013) as "a critical awareness and effort to understand and make our role as humans in communicative relationships and interactions with other

animals more just and responsible” (p. 7). To this end, audiences are told that trainers felt remorse but chose to stay working at SeaWorld because they felt they had to. One trainer commented they felt sorry for Tilikum because, “if they leave, who will take care of him.”

These scenes in the film work to create a witnessing opportunity that presents captivity as wrong. The first move to making this argument is the “orca-knapping” scene. The audience meets John Crowe who hunted and captured Tilikum in Puget Sound, Washington, 1970. We quote this scene to show Crowe’s complicity in commodity capitalism in marine entertainment, along with his awareness and regret illustrating his implication in the event.

We’re there trying to get the orca in the stretcher and the whole fam damily [*sic*] is there 25 yards away may be in a big line and they’re communicating back and forth. Well, you understand then what you’re doing (Pause). I ... I lost it. I just started crying. I didn’t stop working, but I ... you know ... I just couldn’t handle it. Just like kidnapping a little kid away from its mother. Everybody’s watching, what can you do? It’s the worst thing I can think of. I can’t think of anything worse than that. This really sounds bad but when the whole hunt was over there were three dead whales in the net. So they had Peter, Brian, and I cut the whales open, fill them up with rocks and put anchors on their tails and sink them. Well (pause), really I didn’t even think about it being illegal at that point. I thought it was a PR thing ... I’ve been part of a revolution and the change of presidents in Central and South America and seen some things that it’s hard to believe. But this is the worst thing that I’ve ever done, is hunt that whale (*Blackfish*).

Crowe remembers crying during this orca-knapping. His “confession” of this to the viewer exposes an embodied witnessing rhetoric that may create a breach for the audience. Crowe believed the whales were communicating to each other. He expresses a view indicating that the whales had conscious awareness while witnessing the taking of their children. This is exemplified by the fact that when the young ones were corralled they stayed, even though they could have left and protected themselves from any potential harm from the hunters. To this end, Howard Garrett prefaces this scene with Crowe by stating that the captors were throwing bombs in the water to herd the whales, “but the orcas had been caught before and *they knew* what was going on and *they knew* their young ones would be taken from them” (*Blackfish*). Both of these men confidently discuss orca intelligence as identifiable with human intelligence. As such, in line with various campaigns and responses, the audience may view captured orcas as prisoners. Viewing orcas as prisoners allows the audience to move into implication, seeing trainers and employees as prison guards. Moreover, all those involved with every stage of captivity, from capture to passive marine park tourist, are culpable. Seen in this light, passive tourism becomes an active part in the oppressive system of imprisonment and may also be a moment where audience members shift from complicity to implication. Supporting this claim, former senior orca trainer John Hargrove (2015) writes

in his book *Beneath the Surface: Killer Whales, SeaWorld, and the Truth beyond Blackfish*:

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. You can be a prisoner and genuinely like a specific prison guard—and that prison guard may genuinely like you—but that doesn’t take away the fact that you’re in prison (Hargrove, 2015, p. 77).

There are currently 56 known “prisoner-whales” in captivity worldwide (Whale and Dolphin Conservation, n.d.). The film does not just blame SeaWorld or their trainers as responsible for maintaining the prison, but implicates the public (e.g., tourists, spectators, and park visitors) as a part of the prison system as a whole. An important element of the prisoner metaphor is that it opens up understandings of other-than-human captivity as problematic entertainment. Orcas held against their will, in prison-like conditions, cannot be viewed as “happy” or “healthy.” Rather, the film presents another narrative about captivity, claiming that it leads to psychosis. Psychosis is a result of the orca’s living conditions in small cells, and effectually, psychosis is the cause for Tilikum’s (and other orcas) attacks. One example was described in the film from the portion of Tilikum’s life when he was imprisoned at Sealand in Canada. Audiences hear from the Sealand owner and former trainer that the trainers would withhold food to coerce the whales into the evening modules and, if they went in, they would get to eat. Tilikum would spend from 5:00 p.m. until 7:00 a.m. in a small, dark, module cell and the two female whales he was imprisoned with would “rake” (scraping their teeth on his flesh) him in the night. *Blackfish* takes on the perspective of the whale-prisoner and allows the audience to “feel” their captivity. Another clip, taken from a CNN news spot, shows anchor Jane Velez-Mitchell responding to one of Tilikum’s attacks: “If you were in a bathtub for 25 years, don’t you think you’d get a little psychotic?” (*Blackfish*). These scenes focus on Tilikum’s experience at Sealand, emphasizing his confinement, isolation, and abuse by his fellow prisoners. This arguably led to his psychosis, resulting in the murder of Kelty Burn on February 21, 1991, in Victoria, British Columbia, the first of Tilikum’s three homicides. Ex-trainer Samantha Berg comments in the film, “Tilikum is not an evil animal—he is a highly intelligent, emotionally complex mammal. And we’ve made him psychotic” (*Blackfish*). Tilikum’s actions could be dismissed as a case of “one bad apple,” however, the film makes clear that there have been several prisoner-whales that have violently attacked and injured human trainers. Other parts of the film discuss the indicators of psychosis or mental distress by showing how the whale-prisoners often gnaw on their enclosures, bang on their pens, and attack

each other, leading to health issues like severe tooth and stomach problems.

The psychosis narrative is a result of understanding captivity as imprisonment and is important because it shifts the discussion of captivity from being necessary, healthy, or important for environmental advocacy as SeaWorld claims. It instead highlights captivity as “unnatural” and damaging to the orcas, and moreover, dangerous for trainers (prison guards) working with the orcas. The psychosis narrative may also be important in the implication stage of understanding human-orca communication, as it implicates human spectators and tourists as being partially responsible for orca imprisonment. At the same time, however, the psychosis narrative still mitigates or overlooks the orcas’ agency in their own actions. It suggests that the attacks are the direct effects of mental illness, as though the orcas could not control how they acted. As such, captivity is presented as only being a problem because of the health issues it creates. This narrative may be important, but we contend that it is not what allows for a sustained “Blackfish Effect.” The psychosis narrative does not necessitate the “freeing” of these orcas, but rather allows for potential other solutions, i.e., a bigger pool enclosure and more area to swim. However, the response to the film shows that audiences are not satisfied with SeaWorld’s proposals for bigger pools. Rather, they demand exoneration.

Tilikum’s attacks were not simply a result of psychosis. Orcas should be acknowledged as intelligent and active agents. We read them as intentional revolutionaries struggling against their prison guards. Following an internatural communication paradigm, these actions should be embraced and witnessed as an intentional demand for release. Here, the film teaches audience how the binary is inverted, both materially (Tilikum’s physical control over his victims) and symbolically (interpreting Tilikum’s actions as deliberate calls for release). It is this agency that we want to highlight as being important for the move from *implication* to *coherence* and new internatural understandings of human-orca communication.

## VIOLENT SPECTACLE: SHIFTING TO COHERENCE

Milstein (2011) finds that most western discourse on human-nature relationships is framed in a way that presents humans as agents and nature, in this case whales, as objects. However, Tilikum’s story in *Blackfish* positions him as an active agent who potentially chooses when and how to perform “violent” spectacle. It is important to note here that the six major attacks by prisoner-orcas discussed in the film are all performed in front of public audiences except for one. In trying to hear different voices of the other (Carbaugh, 1999), we contend that these public performances of power are intentional and illustrative of a “speaking” voice utilizing alternative symbolics. Plec (2013) writes about “the possibilities of a coherence theory of human-animal relations ... for repositioning our human ways of communicating and knowing alongside rather than above those of other animals” (p. 7). The human voices in *Blackfish* (except for one expert witness in Brancheau’s court proceedings) indicate that the power-over model of captivity is no longer justified for

a variety of reasons. The documentary’s emphasis of grotesque and horrifying whale attacks and murder scenes brings to the surface discourses of human exceptionalism. The captivity and, in turn, torturous reality of orcas becomes extremely problematic for viewers as the film claims that orcas are sentient beings like humans. The comparison of humans as nearly identical to orcas, combined with the chaos of trainer incidents, helps to shift the audience toward a coherence paradigm that sees the “freak show” and “horror” aspects of captivity.

A statement appearing on the *Blackfish* official film site states: “A mesmerizing psychological thriller with a killer whale at its center, *Blackfish* is the first film since *Grizzly Man* to show how nature can get revenge on man when pushed to its limits” (<http://blackfishmovie.com>). Hailing *Grizzly Man* in this comment draws explicit connections between the two films, illustrating the perceived consequences of human interactions with charismatic megafauna that have been pushed to their limits and are seeking revenge against “man.” Schutten (2008) in her analysis of the documentary *Grizzly Man* writes about the predator/prey relationship and the nature/culture binary that posits humans as objects rather than subjects and “forcibly moves humans to the nature side of the dualism, thereby questioning the superiority of the culture side of the binary by exposing human vulnerability” (p. 195). We argue that the discomfort felt by some viewers to Treadwell’s death is similar to the dissonance felt by audiences to Brancheau’s death. Both of these films captivate audiences and are posited as psychological thrillers highlighting human vulnerabilities. *Blackfish* could be read as an example of audiences interpreting or understanding, in some way, internatural communication.

One such scene in the film shows an attack on Ken Peters, an experienced trainer working at SeaWorld in 2006. Peters was preparing for a “rocket hop” with Kasatka, a 5,000 lb orca. This segment begins with a clip from *The Today Show* where anchors introduce the story by saying, “A SeaWorld trainer is recovering today after a *terrifying* ordeal in front of a *horrified* audience” (*Blackfish*). Next, the viewer sees the happy and enthusiastic trainers working with the orcas while SeaWorld’s signature upbeat show tunes play in the background. We then read text saying, “Seconds after diving in, Kasatka seizes Ken’s foot” (*Blackfish*). This scene takes a dramatic shift at this moment as an ominous, eerie, musical soundtrack begins playing. The music is reminiscent of the attack scenes from the oceanic thriller *Jaws* (1975). We quote the narration at length here to illustrate the conscious will of orcas like Kasatka:

[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. When he was at the surface, he didn’t panic, he didn’t thrash, he didn’t scream. Maybe he’s just built that way but he, uh, he stroked the whale. And the whale let go of one foot and grabbed the other. That’s a pretty deep pool and he took him right down....He [Peters] knew what he was doing because when, you can see him actually in the film, the def is so good you

can see him ventilating really hard so he knows about swimming and diving and being underwater, he may have been assuming he was going under again. I did not walk away unimpressed by his calm demeanor during that whole affair. I would be scared shitless. He was near to the end. Presumably, Ken Peters had a relationship with this whale. Maybe he did and maybe that's what saved him but Peters got the whale to let him go. And they strung a net across. And Ken Peters pulled himself over the floatline and swam like a demon to the slide out because the whale was coming right behind him. The whale jumped over it and came right after him. He tried to stand up and run but of course his feet were damaged, I mean he just fell. Scrambled (Cowperthwaite and Oteyza, 2013).

It is interesting to note the commentary by Duffus in the beginning of this scene because he seems to be indicating that Kasatka knew how long she was taking him down as she was conscious of the “mark” in which Peters would drown. To this end, Hargrove (2015) discusses orca's use of echolocation in the wild. He writes, “their sonar allows them to sense the heart rate and breathing of their prey. It helps the whales strategize their final kill” (p. 89). In captivity, this ability helps whales locate and find their trainer for their performances. In other words, this comment is illustrative of Kasatka's intelligence and ability to use her senses to make a choice about whether or not to kill Peters.

The overarching visual representation of this scene disrupts the normative SeaWorld performance because Kasatka is intentionally exerting authority over the situation, disrupting the binary, and manipulating or even “playing with” her trainer, taking back physical control of the performance. Additionally, this scene counters the position that captive orcas do not intentionally attack their captors. They can and will. As a marine-loving culture, we often refuse to believe that Kasatka had agency in this example and rather see the scene as SeaWorld depicts it viewing orcas as either innocent in the event (blaming the trainer's mistakes), or as *Blackfish* depicts the orcas as “sick” and damaged from psychosis and as such only “attacking” because they are “crazy” and not out of intentional will. Our point then is to illustrate how we can understand and interpret these events as internatural communication. In acknowledging an alternative symbolic, we should listen and respond to the orca's clear communication, rather than try to explain it away as “hysterical” psychosis or an exceptional, out-of-the-ordinary event. We argue that the audience has the potential to interpret the film, like this scene discussed, as internatural communication, i.e., Kasatka's legitimate communication.

In addition to the agency read into Kasatka's attack, *Blackfish* further illustrates the intention behind Tilikum's second murder of Daniel Dukes on July seventh, 1999, which could have arguably been done for “show.” Splicing together the narrative with two ex-trainers, Jeffrey Ventre and John Jett, viewers are presented with Dukes' account as they both describe SeaWorld's public relations perspective on the tragedy:

[It was a] perfect storyline, a mentally disturbed guy hides in the park after hours, and strips his clothes off

and decides he wants to have a magical experience with the orca and drowns because he became hypothermic. So, that's the storyline and none of us were there to know the difference... One of the employees, I don't know if it was a physical therapist or somebody with, coming in the morning and there was Tilikum with a dead naked guy on his back, kind of parading him around the back pool. The public relations spin on this was that he was kind of a drifter who died of hypothermia but the medical examiner reports were more graphic than that. For example, Tilikum stripped him, bit off his genitals, there was bite marks all over his body (*Blackfish*).

The use of the descriptor “parading” here is of interest. Parading points to the metaphor of circus performance built into SeaWorld's image. Milstein (2016) analyzes how the “performer metaphor” constitutes “star making fetishism” (p. 230) where tourists view the wild Southern Resident Killer Whales (SRKW) and often view what they are watching as a “show” that “situated wild nature as intentionally exhibiting for humans” (p. 233). The performer metaphor, while representing an “intense human–whale association, it simultaneously constituted anthropocentric detachment” (Milstein, 2016, p. 232). In profit-based marine amusement parks, the performer metaphor is a key part of the experience, conditioning viewers to see the “circus” in which orcas are the stars of the show. Here, the term parading illustrates how deeply ingrained the performance metaphor is for witnesses. Orca flips and spy-hops are viewed in the same way as the murder—as a performance.

The SeaWorld performer metaphor extends into the “wild” as Milstein (2016) looks at how audiences of whale-watching tours often view the whales in the same light as places such as SeaWorld. These tourists often claim that the wild orcas chose to come near the boat to put on a “show” for the particular tourists, that they were “chosen.” With prisoner-whales, the performer metaphor seems to be so routine that both Ventre and Jett used it to describe this attack *via* Tilikum's parading. Interpreting this as more than a coincidental word choice, this scene exhibits how Tilikum executed his attack. He did not simply murder Dukes. Rather, as he was trained and coerced to perform daily in front of an audience, Tilikum performs with Duke's body, “parading” him around until morning. This potential choice by Tilikum disrupts the popular notion of killer whales as “pool toys” (Morton, 2002), reasserting their position as apex predator. One could interpret this as a feeling of pride, a “voice” of sorts from Tilikum *via* his predatory performance that illustrates his agency.

The final example of disruption of the binary/dualism that we discuss is that of Dawn Brancheau's death on February 24, 2010 at SeaWorld Orlando. The film opens with a voice recording of the 911 call:

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 (*Blackfish*).

The audience hears dissonance and hesitation in the voices of both people on the phone that seems to center on the disruption brought about by the word choice of “eaten.” To this end, Schutten (2008) writes, “seeing a human animal become food for “wild” animals interrupts the narrative that humans are above animals” (p. 205). Tilikum did not necessarily “eat” Brancheau, yet, this is the word choice of the 911 caller, indicating dissonance felt by the predator/prey relationship being disrupted. This illustrates that the humans watching recognized the disruption in an artificial atmosphere where we forget we are prey, inverting the hierarchy where humans are seen as superior and in control. Furthermore, the imagined sight of teeth on skin in the act of eating a human may create a visceral effect constructing an embodied experience of what it may mean to feel like prey. News of Brancheau’s death spread quickly to the other SeaWorld parks. According to Hargrove:

They were gathering all the trainers at the Texas park. [And they told us] “There’s been an accident at the Florida park and a trainer was killed” [then we were told] “and he [Tilikum] still has her.” And I just was so disturbed by that and the reality of how powerless we are (*Blackfish*).

Hargrove’s realization of his powerlessness brings to light how Milstein (2009) discusses zoos and animals in captivity in terms of power and the human gaze. She explains that the “exhibition of animals” as the “central function of zoos, is a process of power” determined by the visitor’s gaze. She links Foucault’s description of surveillance and power, “leaving the powerless at all times subject to the gaze of the powerful” (p. 32). Milstein asserts, “the zoo animal is always captive object to the human subjective gaze. The gaze is one-way, subject to object, allowing only for a one-way subject-subjective vision” (Milstein, 2009, p. 32). The one-way gaze described by Milstein is reinforced at SeaWorld parks as spectators view captive beings, restricted in tanks and cages and powerless to the subjective gaze of humans. However, it is the documentary *Blackfish* that exposes and illustrates the breach in the one-way gaze where Tilikum is *not* subject to the gaze of the powerful but rather shifts his gaze toward the audience. This shift becomes a self-reflexive mirror where humans have their actions as captors reflected back to them *via* the resistance of Tilikum and others like him. His actions reflect agency and intent switching the subject position and potentially moving audiences toward coherence.

In one example of agency, the trainers agree, after watching the video of this performance, that Tilikum was aware that the food was running out because he could hear the ice clanging at the bottom of the bucket. Berg and Jett continue:

There’s no food left, she kept asking him for more and more behaviors. He wasn’t getting reinforced for the behaviors he was doing correctly. He was probably frustrated towards the end. Then she walked around the perimeter of G Pool. He followed her [note: ominous intense music begins to play in the film indicating he was stalking her or behaving intentionally]. And then

continued over to the rocky ledge area where she laid down with him to do a relationship session, which is quiet time basically. Tilikum at some point grabbed a hold of her left forearm and started to drag her and eventually did a barrel roll and pulled her in. May have started as play, or frustration, and, uh, clearly escalated to be very violent behavior that I think was anything but play. In the end, you know, he basically just completely mutilated that poor girl (*Blackfish*).

According to the autopsy report presented in the film, Brancheau’s cause of death was “drowning and traumatic injuries” (*Blackfish*). While Tilikum is certainly subject to the human gaze, he is not powerless underneath it but subverts it *via* his killing performances. Tilikum exerts power by possibly choosing when and how to act-by publicly murdering a trainer in front of the “gazing” audience.

Understanding Tilikum’s attacks in this light, as a series of willful and deliberate communicative acts, is a step toward shifting our understanding of human-orca communication from *implication* to *coherence*. A coherence ideology structure requires that humans be able to recognize and understand themselves as prey or in a one-down position in order to become equal members of a biotic community. The film’s overt narrative is one of power-over in that, first, humans have power over orcas by first capturing orcas and forcing them to perform for human entertainment. Second, humans have power-over in that we are responsible for driving them to psychosis and we have the power to release them, potentially situating them as passive victims without their own voice. However, the film’s resistive message challenges these power-over discourses revealing power-with relationships between humans and orcas, or “knowing alongside” (Plec, 2013) orcas. Power-with paradigms often acknowledge subaltern voices. These human-orca relationships are equal and we have to work harder to listen to, and legitimize orca communication, which might not necessarily be what we would want to hear.

## DISCUSSION: LEGITIMIZING SUBALTERN MORE-THAN-HUMAN COMMUNICATION

We claim that that the shift to coherence is one contribution to the “Blackfish Effect” and the sustained movement demanding the release of Tilikum and others like him based on prisoner-orcas legitimate communication. In the film, Christopher Porter, former Tilikum trainer, seems to have “heard” Tilikum’s message and claims he understands because they had a relationship:

And you understand that he’s killing, not to be a savage. He’s not killing because he’s just crazy. He’s not killing because he doesn’t know what he’s doing. He’s killing because he’s frustrated, and he’s got aggravations, and he doesn’t know how to—he has no outlet for it (*Blackfish*).

Porter aligns with our argument by acknowledging that Tilikum is not killing because he is “savage,” “crazy,” acting out

of some primal predatory response, or because he is hungry. Tilikum and others like him in captivity attack and kill perhaps in an effort to be heard and to clearly communicate their disdain for their reality. We understand that we do not know what Tilikum is expressly communicating. Our intention is not to speak for Tilikum, or further continue a power-over relationship by taking the authority to read and interpret what he is “saying.” However, part of making the shift to coherence is to value intuition/emotion over reason and we have scrutinized and read the film in order to interpret prisoner-orcas’ symbolic meanings of material conditions. One aspect of coherence that makes this possible is empathy. Empathy is a key initial step in developing an understanding of internatural communication—it acknowledges that observation can create empathy, on one hand, while simultaneously recognizing the impossibility of complete understanding (Plec, 2013). In this case, complete understanding need not prevent the release of prisoner-orcas. It is empathy, intuition, feeling, interconnection, and so forth that drives the shift to alternative paradigms. Witnessing often allows humans to access such shifts. As Pezzullo (2007) reminds us, “The witness is an important figure in politics because he or she can potentially take action afterward, reporting, testifying, and relating to others that which has been witnessed” (p. 146). In this way, the testimony of interviewees in the film like John Crow and John Hargrove provide a witnessing medium that contributes to a coherence frame. Simply, the acknowledgment of Tilikum as a communicating actor, allowing for his actions to be read as alternative symbolics, is enough to understand the demand for release from captivity no matter what form that freedom takes.

In an attempt to exercise our imaginary to include spaces for alternative meanings, we turn now to discussing some internatural communication possibilities. This section requires the reader to suspend some of their potential preconceived or normative views about human nature communication. One such normative view, as Callister (2013) explains in her study of human encounters with beached whales, is that there is “little room for apprehending the whale as subject capable of voice. As such, any notion of “listening” to beached whales as material rhetorical articulations is absent” (p. 47). Rather than ignore the “material rhetorical articulations” of whales, reading their bodies through internatural communication paradigms should have implications for shaping public policy. This reading of Tilikum and other attacks in *Blackfish* is quite literally “a rehearsal of ways of listening to non-dominant voices and non-human agents and their inclusion in the production of meaning, policy, and material conditions” (Rogers, 1998, p. 268).

Environmental communication scholars have argued for an integrated community where humans and “extra-human citizens” participate in decision-making (Peterson et al., 2007; Salvador and Clarke, 2011). Our article has been one attempt to illustrate how extra-human citizens participate, and even instigate, policy-making by listening to orcas as unique actors with intelligible behaviors. We push this claim despite the rhetorical tendency to write this intelligibility off as anthropocentric elitism. In this way, we employ the Weyekin principle, which holds

“that in advancing an embodied critical rhetoric, the researcher attends to the corporeal experience of the non-human world so as to articulate the symbolic-material tensions obscured by predominant systems of meaning (Salvador and Clarke, 2011, p. 248). In understanding and listening to captive orcas, both at SeaWorld and other marine prisons, we may begin to see them as a crucial part of the “Blackfish Effect,” the policy proposals, and SeaWorld boycotts that have followed. In this way, orcas create a form of protest rhetoric that has observable implications on policy reform. Rather than dismiss Tilikum as a malleable part of nature used for human anthropocentric ends, we should acknowledge Tilikum as the first actor, the deliberate catalyst, for the effect. Tilikum, and the other orcas stories discussed in *Blackfish*, were the first activists that initiated this particular environmental justice movement.

Reading the whales-as-activists takes us to another potential understanding of captive orcas. As previously discussed, the prisoner metaphor is important in challenging the normative narrative of captivity as important for “environmental education and science,” as claimed by SeaWorld. But the prisoner-orca metaphor can go further in highlighting the whales’ agency. We suggest, instead, the political prisoner metaphor. Captive orcas are not simply held captive. Rather, they are activists imprisoned for political reasons, for example, animal exploitation for corporate profit. Their deliberate actions while in captivity may be meant to communicate a political injustice to their “free” audiences. Milstein (2011) coins the term “whale insiders,” to refer to researchers, advocates, and others who may become advocates for preservation based on a direct nature experience with whales in the wild (Milstein, 2011, p. 7). Viewers of *Blackfish* may not have direct experience with whales in the wild but are exposed to the film’s narrative of captivity preventing a wildlife. To this end, Milstein (2011) discusses how wild “whale insiders” see the potential relationship between orcas in the wild and captive orcas, understanding “the first captive orcas as, in a sense, serving as ambassadors for wild orcas” (p. 8). Tilikum may certainly be an ambassador for wild orcas, and in this instance, he may be a political prisoner-orca demanding an end to capture and captivity as it is practiced throughout the world. This highlights “the need to [not only] listen to the other-than-human, but to treat them as agents, as active participants in the construction of meaning” (Schutten and Rogers, 2011, p. 274).

Alternative symbolics, and by extension alternative listening abilities, requires practice in expanding our perceptions. In this way, *Blackfish* has provided audiences with a boundary breach that has led to the “Blackfish Effect,” which can be interpreted through frames of internatural communication. Importantly Carbaugh (2007) outlines “Touchstones on Earth” and charges the reader with a challenge stating that we need to “open our understanding to the world beyond our words, beyond our representations of it, to learn anew from it, and to be in a position better to speak about what we come to know and thus to act accordingly” (p. 68). By telling Tilikum’s story and other prisoner-orca narratives, the film has illustrated complicity and implication, and, finally, allows for expansion of meaning toward what a coherence lens

might include. Coherence necessitates that audiences take orca communication seriously and acknowledge them as key players in shaping public policy and participating in environmental social movements. Utilizing Plec's (2013) three categories and, in particular, expansion of a coherence framework, helps take our interpretation of *Blackfish* deeper to incorporate orca communication into our understandings of environmental social movements and answering Carbaugh's challenge. Furthermore, this framework complicates our understandings of the binary as it is symbolically arrogant and materially impossible. This prescriptive framework, applying complicity, implication, and coherence, could be seen as a guide for environmentalists as they work to incorporate internatural communication into understandings of captivity and sustainability practices. If the political prisoner metaphor is taken into consideration and, we contend, moves beyond metaphor, it would be within the realm of possibility for captive orcas to work alongside human political activists to campaign for a Presidential pardon. In the campaign for orca

justice, we can hope "that in 50 years we'll look back and think, 'My God, what a barbaric time'" (*Blackfish*).

## AUTHOR NOTES

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## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Both authors researched, wrote, revised, and came up with the intellectual content for this essay equally.

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