

# Opening the Doors of Perception and Looking Beyond the Binary

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**Abstract:** The great intellectual strides attributed to the ontological shift born of the Cartesian Divide have come at a cost. Constricting reality into binary and hierarchical structures often renders holistic points of view either superfluous or invisible and limit our analyses to only those observations that pass through our terministic screens (Burke, 1966). Instead, adopting contemporary physics’ understanding that the universe is an integrated whole comprised of dynamic relationships invites paradigmatically different observations to the world of animal scholarship. This paper explores two theoretical framings that demonstrate this: Milstein’s (2011) work on identification and consubstantiality in whale tourism as it relates to animal autopoiesis, and Schutten and Burford’s (2017) application of coherence that reveals orca behavior as a form of internatural communication. By applying such open and egalitarian perspectives in more of our efforts to understand non-human animals, human animals can continue to expand and refine their own perceptive capabilities.

**Keywords:** Animal Communication, Autopoiesis, Internatural Communication, Hierarchy

## PROLOGUE

It was in early spring when a few of us rented a beach house in northern Baja, California. A friend and I suited up to go for a surf as soon as we arrived. Despite the water being glassy and smooth, the waves looked a bit unruly. But the sun was shining, and the waves were big enough to keep things interesting, so we decided to paddle out. Thirty minutes into our session, as we were heading back out through the breaking waves, I heard an enormous *WHOOSH*. It was not just loud. It *felt* big, and at some instinctive level, I knew it was from a whale’s blowhole. I tried to breathe through the knot in my stomach to calm down and be more present in the situation. After all, how often has anyone been in the line-up with a whale? We both saw him<sup>1</sup> then, a majestic and graceful gray whale, as his lower spine

breached the water before he undulated back under the waves. After the set<sup>2</sup> passed, we kept our eyes open, keen for another sighting. Twenty minutes later, as another set of waves was building on the horizon, he was back, and he was close! He had circled back and could not have been more than 25 yards away from us. Suddenly I was struck by a pang of worry – the set I had seen was looming now and he was in the impact zone, where the waves break most intensely. I wanted to call out some kind of warning. But what?

There was no need, of course – this was his home. He glided gracefully toward the peak of the large swell and rolled his body through the wave just as it was cresting. I will never forget that moment, or the image of his body, backlit by the setting sun – the silhouette of a playful giant bathed in golden-green light.

Afterward, my friend and I sat on our boards awash with wonder, joy, and disbelief at having shared this moment with one of Earth’s largest animals. Later, my friend stumbled across *Lagoon Time* (Swartz, 2014), written by one of the first people to study the gray whales of San Ignacio Lagoon. It included eye-witness accounts of adolescent male whales playing and surfing in the waves at the mouth of the lagoon. Looking back with this new lens, I was finally able to process what I had seen. That gray whale we saw that afternoon knew exactly what he was doing. Not only did he pass through that big wave set unscathed – it was what he was there for. I have shared the line-up with pelicans for decades, and I have often watched, rapt, as they effortlessly and endlessly glided aloft on the air currents caused by the rolling swells. Having seen it so many times, I have a hard time denying outright that what is likely an energy-saving practice is also something from which pelicans derive great pleasure.

Belatedly, I can now appreciate the possibility that this whale was just another surfer in the line-up, albeit one who happened to be migrating thousands of miles north along the Pacific coastline. This behavior is not so different from my own when I used to grab a few waves during my lunch break.

<sup>1</sup> I identify this whale as a male based on eye-witness accounts of similar whale behavior that I discuss below.

<sup>2</sup> Larger waves tend to arrive at the shore in “sets,” or groups of waves.

While I argue that gray whales, pelicans, and other animals have probably been surfing for millennia if not millions of years, it is difficult to perceive this possibility unless we are willing to see these animals as more than objects. This can happen when we allow animals to exist as beings with agency and choice. It is precisely this shift in my own intellectual framework that has allowed me to perceive the possibility of a whale who understands and appreciates wave riding as much as I do. I wonder, what else could we learn if we were to cleanse our perceptual filters of the hierarchical, binary thinking that has dominated mainstream society for generations?

### BEYOND THE BINARY

At 22 feet and 12,000 pounds, [Tilikum] was a would-be ocean king reduced to a court jester with a floppy dorsal fin, splashing delirious SeaWorld audiences at the end of circus-style shows. (Zimmerman, 2016)

A wondrous thing happens when an animal moves from population status to individual standing: it can no longer be treated with impunity. (Morton, 2002)

If the doors of perception were cleansed every thing would appear to man as it is: Infinite. For man has closed himself up, till he sees all things thro' narrow chinks of his cavern.

– William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*

The dominant paradigm that has shaped humanity's understanding of the external world is based on the notion that all things are separate, distinct, and knowable. In the words of Descartes, "I think, therefore I am." Embedded in this celebrated axiom is the binary distinction between mind and body, "I" and "it." While great strides in philosophy, life sciences, and other fields can be attributed to this Cartesian Divide, there have also been great losses. Concomitant with the view that all things are separate is the implication that they are also unequal. Look around at the contemporary world. Where you see the separation of the world into binaries, you will see the corresponding hierarchy of each pairing – subjects and objects, self and other, civilization and wilderness, human and animal.

The pairs tend to exist in subjugation to or domination of their supposed opposite. Koons (2011) argued that "the subject-object relationships that structure gender, race, and class injustice" that permeate law and language can be traced back to this basic binary construct (p. 50). Indeed, I would argue that the Black Lives Matter movement that took hold around the world after the murder of George Floyd in the summer of 2020 revealed the ubiquity, as well as the persistent and grave danger this paradigm poses not only for human relations, but for humanity's relationship with the world and

everything in it. Following Koons' (2011) argument further, we can see that today's dominant worldview is a neoliberal order deeply embedded in a binary ontology: Markets are either free, or they are regulated.

For Singer (1974), when one makes another subject an "other," domination follows, and for Bookchin (2015), "the very idea of dominating nature stems from the domination of human by human (p. 31). Koons (2011) went further, adding that such an outlook "supports the exploitation and degradation of Nature, viewed as a 'resource' to be used by humans without compunction and as a wilderness to be tamed, as in *Humanity versus Nature*" (p. 50). Contemporary, cutting-edge animal rights theorist Tema Milstein (2011) lamented the great number of scholars of nature and culture who argue that "discursive abstractions [are devices for] distancing and objectifying nature, further reifying human nature binaries and exacerbating humanity's devastating ecological destruction" (p. 4). While Haraway (1991) wrote, "animal societies have been extensively employed in rationalization and naturalization of the oppressive orders of domination in the human body politic.... They...continue to accept the ideology of the split between nature and culture" (p. 11). This paradigm has deep and wide-ranging impacts on human and nonhuman animals alike.

Let us begin by looking at its impact on human beings and the manner in which human societies have employed binaries and hierarchies among each other. Olivier and Cordeiro-Rodrigues (2017) observed that "[t]he dynamics of racism that occur to produce these hierarchies typically consist of three forces: *Differentiation*, inferiorisation by comparison, and invisibility (p. 2, emphasis added). Taussig (1986) provided an additional conceptual layer, arguing that the idea of "the other" was largely, if subconsciously, created to justify their subjugation. What Taussig (1986) termed "the colonial mirror of production" worked thus: In the lands they came to exploit, colonizers created narratives that demonized the indigenous people they encountered. They were described as savage, animalistic, and monstrous – descriptions that were often rendered before the indigenes were slaughtered most brutally. Besides serving as convenient justification for the exploitation of "newfound" land and resources, these descriptions often had more to do with the colonizers' fears (or latent desires) than actual, observed reality of the native peoples.

Once the mythopoesis was complete, the colonists were free to enact these very same brutalities from their lofty and noble station. Thus, the savage could be civilized and elevated to Western standards while they and their lands were justifiably dominated and exploited. In other words, the colonizers were required to wage brutal wars of terror on the indigenous peoples before the natives could do the same, inevitable thing to them. It is clear that the colonizer did not,

or was unwilling to see native peoples as equals, much less entirely human subjects. Conveniently then, having created a void where human agency should lie, they were able to fill it with their own monstrous reflections. Taussig's (1986) colonial mirror could therefore be seen as binary thinking deployed as a tool that both justifies domination and produces the nature of the dominator's behavior in their subjugation of the other. Wolfe (2009) adapted this theoretical lens to highlight the role played by the human-animal binary: Humans animalize other humans in order to oppress them. Derrida (2008) went further and brought us back to Taussig's (1986) mirror of production. He proposed that the violence humans have perpetrated against animals does not violate our humanness, it actually helps constitute it. Thus, I wonder: Do the qualities we ascribe to "wild animals" have more to do with the human psyche than observed animal behavior? Has the lens of dominant human perception been so clouded by binarism and the desire to exploit the other that we could expand Taussig's (1986) term to "the oppressor's mirror of production"? What will it take, if not to cleanse, then at least to pry open, these doors of perception?

I argue that human animals within the dominant, mainstream culture have a strong tendency to see nonhuman animals through a false binary. This binary divides our worlds so completely that, to paraphrase Blake (1790), we are left looking at the animal world through only the narrowest chinks of our cavern. Within this worldview, deep thinking and feeling belong to the human side of the divide, the rational side and are thus impossibly unavailable to the brutes and beasts on the other, irrational side. For Weil (2006), citing Rilke (1963) and Grandin and Johnson (2005), epistemological lenses help us to see some things but prevent us from seeing others – in this case, from "seeing what animals see" (p. 88). Burke's (1966) concept of the "terministic screen" was similar – thinking beings such as ourselves can only perceive and comprehend that which is fine enough to pass through our epistemological lens or screen. The terminology we use to describe reality "must be a selection of reality; and to this extent it must function also as a deflection of reality" (p. 45, emphasis added).

Moreover, these are not the only flaws in the ontological foundation that is the Cartesian duality. Burford and Schutten (2017) argued that, on the whole, it "is symbolically arrogant and materially impossible" (p. 10). The very scientific revolution that Descartes helped to create has led to myriad discoveries that, in fact, discredit the simplified model of reality he promulgated. The "new physics" revealed that the "universe is not reflected in hierarchy or separation" (Koons, 2011, p. 51), but is a "single, integral whole composed of a dynamic network of relationships" (Cullinan, 2011, p. 47). In an effort to better understand the animal's world, Wolfe (2009) argued that any discipline working to that end should seek to

dismantle, not reinforce, hierarchies and return society to a place where animals and humans exist on a continuum. Doing so "fundamentally challenges the schema of the knowing subject and its anthropocentric underpinnings sustained and reproduced in the current disciplinary protocols of cultural studies" (Wolfe, 2009, pp. 568-569). This is my goal here – to situate the observer of animals as one among equals. Or, to use Derrida's (2008) term for "neither a species nor a gender nor an individual, [but]...an irreducible living multiplicity of mortals" (p. 41), as *animot* among *animot*.

Situated thus, we can see all animals, human and non, as part of a network of interconnected beings functioning within the greater Earth system. Lippit's (2000) application of Deleuze and Guattari's (1989) rhizome attempted to further such efforts. According to Lippit (2000), the rhizome serves to unblock "communication between human and animal worlds" (p. 128) for it is not constrained by boundaries or difference – the rhizome exists within and across different modes of being. As humans move into this rhizomatic space, we become animal (Deleuze & Guattari, 1989). Such egalitarian perspectives allow for new and paradigmatically different relationships and understandings. The observer is liberated to perceive the world of *animot* reflectively and empathetically in an attempt to understand their experience and – dare I say – intent.

With a shift of perspective, scholars need no longer understand the relationship between human and nonhuman animals as a divide that must be bridged. Deleuze and Guattari's (1989) rhizome enabled us to see the permeating interconnections between human and nonhuman animals, while Derrida's (2008) *animot* invited us to enter and become the abyss. Rhizomatic space offers us a way to dive into the abyss between human and nonhuman animals so that we may begin to perceive and appreciate our many commonalities.

Documentary filmmaker and naturalist Craig Foster did just this, albeit his "abyss" was a shallow kelp forest in False Bay, South Africa. His widely acclaimed and award-winning film, *My Octopus Teacher* (2020) documented the year he spent observing a female octopus he encountered there. Foster was so enthralled by their initial interactions that he dedicated himself to spending every day in the water with her. By immersing himself in the octopus's world, his ontological foundations shifted, and he discovered a "whole new way of looking at this underwater forest" (Briger, 2020, para. 4). Foster came to see himself as being a part of that world, as opposed to apart from it. He subsequently developed an entirely new understanding of the network of life in the kelp forest – that all living beings within False Bay were inextricably and deeply linked to one another.

There is great heuristic power in seeing the "other" as another subject who, when looking at us from their "absolute alterity" (Derrida, 2008, p. 11), sees an "other" in us, too. To quote Weil (2006), "insofar as animals bring us to think, or to unthink, they can

have an immensely powerful effect” (p. 95). Combined with ethical pluralism as “a deep sense of responsibility for an affinity with those who may be different from us” (Wolfe, forthcoming in 2009, as cited in Weil, 2006, p. 96), these open and egalitarian perspectives can expand and refine the perceptive capabilities of scholars (i.e., human animals) as we endeavor to understand nonhuman animals. In the next section, I explore two efforts to do just that through autopoiesis and internatural communication.

### Autopoietic Subjects

If we see the universe as being comprised of autopoietic subjects, that is, beings with the inherent ability to self-organize and be self-aware (Cullinan, 2011), we can begin to see nonhuman animals in a very different light. Given that most dominant cultures in the world are steeped in hierarchical valuation systems, both within the human and greater animal communities, we need tools that help us see beyond these structures. Here, I explore two theoretical framings that are promising in this regard. The first is Milstein’s (2011) work on identification and consubstantiality in whale tourism. Milstein (2011) argued that specific positionalities can foster the perception that whales, in this case, are very like their human observers in many ways. The second framing is inspired by Plec’s (2013) work on coherence, a way of interacting with others that respects their individuality and the integrity of one’s relationship with them, and internatural communication, a term Plec (2013) coined to embrace “the possibilities of human and animal communication with other life forms” (p. 6). Here, I employ Schutten and Burford’s (2017; Burford & Schutten, 2017) application of coherence to put the behavior of an orca into clear relief as a form of internatural communication.

Milstein (2011) wrote:

I use the term “humanimal,” humanature” and “ecoculture” throughout my writing as a way to reflexively engage human and animal, human and nature, ecology and culture, in integral conversation in research as they are in life. *These discursive moves are turns away from binary constructs and notions of humans as separate from animals, nature and ‘the environment’ and turns toward a lexical reciprocal intertwining reflective of living symbolic-material relations...* The terms are in league with Haraway’s use of “naturecultures” to encompass nature and culture as interrelated historical and contemporary entities (*When Species Meet*). (p. 179, Note 1, emphasis added)

Additionally, Milstein (2011) argued that “Burke’s (1950, 1984) notion of consubstantiality, or identification through shared substance, is one sort of identification device advocates used to seed greater humanature connections” (p. 5), connections that transcend binary constructs. Citing Carbaugh (1999), Milstein (2011) added

that “[t]he act of identification also opens channels to *listening to nature*” (p. 18, emphasis added).

Individuality matters. Milstein’s (2011) study of wild whale tourism in the Canadian-American Pacific coast region demonstrated that assigning whales unique alphanumeric identifiers helped initiate “a cultural paradigm shift” (p. 17) in how humans perceived orca individuality, relationships with other orcas, and orca lives in general. Her work “examine[d] the restorative potential of a distinctive, highly individualizing act of identification” (Milstein, 2011, p. 5), an act that can position “whales as active agents and sometimes interactive subjects” (Milstein, 2011, p. 17). The transformative potential of identification is great. For Sowards (2006), “[u]sing identification to connect to the nonhuman world is effective and important in destabilizing the artificial boundaries between culture and nature” (p. 59).

Based on data collected as a participant observer during the summers between 2005 and 2008, Milstein (2011) witnessed the power of “pointing and naming” in fomenting new ways of seeing (p. 4). When the whale experts, or “insiders,” engaged in this act when speaking with tourists, the tourists perceived (at least) some elements of nature as important, unique, and special (Milstein, 2011, p. 7). Many insiders believed that it is this shift that paved the way to make the capture of wild orcas illegal in North America. The ability to identify individual whales provided the foundational knowledge to observe their culture – namely, that they lived in matrilineal pods and that each pod communicated using its own unique dialect (Milstein, 2011; Morton, 2002). Thus, the seemingly banal process of identifying individual whales opened up entirely new ontological vistas for the observers. When insiders identified whales by their unique names or numbers, Milstein (2011) found that it helped evoke a sense of consubstantiality in the tourists they spoke with and allowed those tourists to then “position whales as subjects and agents” (p. 11) in their own comments. Such positioning placed tourists within a rhizomatic space (Deleuze & Guattari, 1989) alongside the whales as preexisting boundaries were erased by the shared appreciation of family and individuality in both species. Thus, both consciously and unconsciously, the orca insiders passed an autopoietic perceptual bridge along to the whale-watching tourists.

Milstein (2011) found that some whale experts were more successful than others in helping tourists identify with the whales. On insider “employed identification...not only in relating the scarcity of whales due to capture, but also by negotiating perceptions of whales as existing in their own right” (p. 12). Another “connect[ed] the act of identification with coming to discern orcas as complex beings, directing tourists to apply this knowledge to whales in front of them and mediating visitor perceptions” (p. 9). Both insiders were

successful in getting at least some tourists to question the presence of orcas in amusement parks.

The perceptual opportunities afforded by identification also led the insiders to develop intimate relationships with the whales in the local, resident pods. Kent, an insider who was particularly astute at whale identification, recounted a time when he passed on a party with his human friends in favor of staying home and listening to the calls among a pod with whom he felt a deep affinity. The way he and other insiders referred to the orcas in these pods as friends and their friends' children reminds me of the way an aunt or uncle might speak about their own family. Milstein (2011) found that "[i]dentifying whales helped protect them, help[ed] connect people to them, and help[ed] people keep track of them" (p. 12). Despite the creative power that identification and consubstantiation afford, however, Milstein (2011) lamented "the near absence of the ecological" element in the dialogue between whale insiders and tourists, a concern to which I return in the following discussion of the second theoretical frame of focus – coherence.

### Coherence and Internatural Communication

Focusing on orcas in captivity, Schutten and Burford's (2017; Burford & Schutten, 2017) work was concerned with the ways Tilikum was represented to and understood by viewers through his portrayal in the film *Blackfish*. The narrative that Burford and Schutten (2017) identified within the film helps us create new metaphors and models for understanding nonhuman animals. Their work built upon Plec's (2013) internatural communication<sup>3</sup>, communication that "includes the exchange of intentional energy between humans and other animals as well as communication among animals and other forms of life" (p. 6). Moving beyond the binary, Burford and Schutten (2017) "argue[d] that the case study of orcas in captivity as a whole illustrates systems thinking...which in turn shows coherence as a way to 'hear' internatural communication" (p. 2). Coherence encompasses being with others, human and nonhuman animals alike, in ways that honors their integrity and the integrity of our relationships with them (Plec, 2013). Speaking to efforts to disrupt binary and hierarchical thinking in particular, coherence "begins with 'a radical critique of duality' and moves toward an 'emancipatory understanding of language and life'" (McPhail, 1996, as cited in Plec, 2013, p. 6). Coherence thus enables us to see Tilikum and other captive orcas as agents with their own free will.

Standing, or rather, swimming, with orcas in this manner, Schutten and Burford (2017) saw Tilikum as "an imprisoned orca attempting a jailbreak, taunting his captors, and demanding

liberation" (pp. 261-262). To refute accusations of anthropocentric elitism, they cited the Wevekin principle: "[I]n advancing an embodied critical rhetoric, the researcher attends to the corporeal experience of the nonhuman world so as to articulate the symbolic-material tensions obscured by predominant systems of meaning" (Salvador & Clarke, 2011, p. 248). Freed from such systems, namely those that are hierarchical in nature, we can perceive the orcas' actions in captivity as deliberate spectacle, even activism. This interpretation is difficult to deny when we consider that Tilikum engaged in multiple attacks on trainers during shows, and that he displayed the body of his second victim, the only non-trainer that he killed, as if they were a trainer as well: After the marine park closed, Daniel Dukes entered Tilikum's tank; when SeaWorld crews arrived at their workstations the next day, they found Tilikum swimming in circles around his tank with Dukes' body draped across his back, just as a trainer would ride him during shows (Schutten & Burford, 2017). Seeing the murder at SeaWorld in this manner is one way that we can "listen to the other-than-human, but [also] treat them as agents, as active participants in the construction of meaning" (Burford & Schutten, 2017, p. 274). Through his violent actions against trespassers and trainers alike, "Tilikum demanded the world confront his reality, Shamu's reality, which involved separation from family, confinement, boredom, chronic disease," and more (Zimmerman, 2016, para. 4). As an infant kidnapped at the age of two (Zimmerman, 2016) and then held captive until his death 34 years later, Tilikum actively exposed the "political injustice" (Burford & Schutten, 2017, p. 9) he was forced to endure for most of his life. If he were human, Tilikum would likely be seen as an autonomous subject taking vengeance on his tormentors. Yet dominant culture limits the perception of Tilikum as an object without agency – an unwitting, if monstrous, victim.

However, as agents atop the Cartesian hierarchy we have created, human animals have choice in how we perceive Tilikum's actions as they were portrayed in *Blackfish*. Although the film served to educate many on the plight of captive orcas and offered a sympathetic portrayal of the animals, it is still limited to binary oppositions. On one hand, we can choose to retain this bifurcated worldview, seeing captive orcas as SeaWorld would – representing "a symptom of psychosis that can be fixed with...a larger and more visually pleasing pen" (Burford & Schutten, 2017, p. 2). Or we can operate as if orcas, and perhaps all beings, are autopoietic in nature and should not be penned in the first place. In this view, "Tilikum's actions...[created] a breach that bridges the divide of human/orca communication by illustrating alternative symbolics" (Schutten &

<sup>3</sup> Plec (2013) wrote, "[s]ome of this work might elsewhere be termed 'zoosemiotics,' 'biorhetoric,' 'communibiology,' 'ecossemiotics,' 'anthrozoology' or even 'corporeal rhetoric' or 'transhuman communication.' I choose the term internatural

communication not to compete with these other labels but rather as a term that can be inclusive of their meanings as well as embracing the possibilities of human and animal communication with other life forms" (p. 6).

Rogers, 2011, as cited in Burford & Schutten, 2017, p. 2). These alternative symbolics include listening and responding to “the orca’s clear communication, rather than try[ing] to explain it away as ‘hysterical’ psychosis or an exceptional, out-of-the-ordinary event” (Burford & Schutten, 2017, p. 7). Burford and Schutten (2017) thus warned human animals against engaging in the same limited, dismissive manner in which SeaWorld and *Blackfish*’s documentarians framed Tilikum’s behavior. Indeed, the trope of the “hysterical female” has often been used to dismiss legitimate concerns raised by an other group long subjugated to “the male” in another hierarchical binary. It is time we expand our intellectual spectrum even further and endeavor to decode the utterances of these others. In what amounted to an inversion of Taussig’s (1986) colonial mirror of production, Burford and Schutten (2017) recounted a scene in *Blackfish*:

Tilikum...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. (p. 8)

By positioning orcas as beings with agency, scholars are less inclined to fall into limited and limiting “power-over discourses” with them (Burford & Schutten, 2017, p. 8). Instead, “power-with paradigms” (Burford & Schutten, 2017, p. 8), which put our two species on equal footing, can help us to explore intellectual and perceptual opportunities heretofore unavailable to us.

## Conclusions

Through these studies of orca and human interaction, we see how identification and coherence promotes the recognition of other beings’ auto-poiesis. While this recognition can lead human animals to develop empathy and deep concern for other animals’ experiences, we must also recognize “the impossibility of complete understanding” (Burford & Schutten, 2017, p. 16). Like Burford and Schutten (2017), I too argue that perhaps understanding should not be our immediate goal. Instead, our focus could be “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, 1998, as cited in Burford & Schutten, 2017, p. 260). Lippit (2000) argued that we can achieve this embrace through Deleuze and Guattari’s (1989) rhizome, something we see in Milstein’s (2011) work with whale insiders. As we engage with animals as fellow subjects in these ways, they are humanized. Or, to be more accurate, the human animal can accept that nonhuman animals may also have those “human” qualities precluded by the Cartesian lens. This is the heart of what we might call an Animal Humanities.

As Olivier and Cordeiro-Rodrigues (2017) argued in their discussion of pain in nonhuman animals, simply because humans cannot directly observe or decipher the way nonhumans experience pain does not preclude its existence. Like that pain, as well as the pleasure I observed in the aforementioned wind-riding pelicans, we can also observe that nonhuman animals grieve. In August of 2018, many commiserated with the orca mother Tahlequah who pushed her dead calf around the North Pacific “for at least 17 days and 1,000 miles...in an unprecedented show of mourning” (Cuthbert & Main, 2018, para. 1). Yet another compelling expression of the emotional lives of animals is demonstrated by the relationship between Peter, a dolphin, and Margaret Howe-Lovatt, a volunteer naturalist for Dr. John Lilly. As part of one of Lilly’s experiments, Margaret and Peter cohabitated for six months and developed a strong emotional attachment to one another (Riley, 2014). When Lilly’s lab ran out of funding, the two were abruptly separated and Peter was moved to a much smaller, and solitary, indoor aquarium. Observers reported he was listless and appeared to be suffering from depression. Within three weeks, in the words of Lilly, Peter “committed suicide” (Riley, 2014, para. 39). Clearly, at least some animals have deep and powerful emotional lives, and seeing Tilikum’s life from this point of view can offer us more sophisticated and nuanced interpretations of his behavior.

To acknowledge these aspects in the lives of nonhuman animals raises difficult questions, however. It forces human animals to confront a well-entrenched and profitable aspect of our dominant paradigm – the subjugation of nonhuman animal bodies for everything from entertainment to food. As Milstein (2011) wrote, “[i]t is one thing as a tourist...to learn whales are unique familial individuals, but quite another to learn...that practices of one’s species are to blame [for their suffering], and that one must and can work to change these practices at individual and systemic scales” (p. 20). As such, she suggested one way to help align human knowledge with human actions is for those who share the stories of nonhuman animals to weave them into their proper ecological context. This practice could also be applied in “endangered species rulings [as they] might encounter more public understanding and compliance” (Milstein, 2011, p. 19) once affected human populations understand the benefits their sacrifices could have for the target species. While these steps could foster new understandings, Gould’s (2007) observation could take us even further. Gould (2007) reminded us that humans are most likely to fight for other species and their environments if they have powerful emotional connections with them. Emotional compassion and ecological contextualization might provide the synergistic force that could shift the dominant, oppressive paradigm that subsumes all other animals under its human iteration.

By applying more open and egalitarian perspectives in our efforts understand nonhuman animals, human animals can continue to expand and refine our own perceptive capabilities. On the other hand, value systems based in binaries and hierarchies help prop up systems of oppression and allow phenomena like the colonial mirror of production (Taussig, 1986) to thrive in nearly every context. Whether it is in the written descriptions of the jungles and their hearts of darkness, a nature documentary, or a horror film, we have long seen its application in our efforts to represent nonhuman animals. Constructing nonhuman animals as cruel, unpredictable, and ruthless has enabled human animals to treat them thus in return.<sup>4</sup> But by looking at nonhuman animals as individual subjects, we can begin to step out of the mist of hierarchical, dominant ideology. With newfound clarity, empathy becomes possible and enables us to construct new narratives that afford animals a richer and broader range of qualities. Coming from a place of self-reflection that seeks an empathetic understanding, these qualities can then be defined less by the observer's preconceived notions of the other, and more by what arises out of our interactions with one another. Instead of seeing a whale in danger of getting beached by the surf, I can see a whale choosing to play among the waves. When we break free of the subject-object binary and no longer separate ourselves from those that do not communicate as we do, we can see orcas, and all animals, anew.

Milstein (2011) demonstrated that identifying whales as individuals provided the critical ontological shift that led to our ability to perceive their culture and language. Seeing whales as subjects also enables us to wonder what they might be saying to one another, and what they might say to us. These explorations are not available to us if we see animals as mere objects, as others. But seeing them as fellow agents who are actively engaged in and part of the Earth system along with us, new questions like this can arise.

Let us consider whale communication. The early ancestors of whales and dolphins were land animals who returned to the oceans. Their evolution in that three-dimensional space likely changed the way they perceive their surroundings as well as how they communicate (Morton, 2002). Using a device developed to turn sound waves into images,<sup>5</sup> Kassewitz et al. (2016) proved that dolphins are able to send each other visual imagery through sound, or sonograms. Unconstrained by a hierarchical value system, Kassewitz et al. (2016) were open to perceiving that dolphins are capable of sending and receiving three-dimensional sonographic facsimiles of

their world. It is worth noting that this ability is still beyond human technology. Indeed, “[a]nimals – and their capacity for instinctive, almost telepathic communication – [might] put into question the primacy of human language and consciousness as optimal modes of communication” (Lippit, 2000, p. 2).

Weil (2006) noted:

We cannot know for sure which is right; all we can do is attempt to listen and respond through an act of empathy that may require becoming someone or something we have never been and imagining a response that is other than what we have known. (p. 96)

With our perceptions cleansed of hierarchical value systems and empowered to see nonhuman animals as agents in their own rights, one has to wonder: What other discoveries await us?<sup>6</sup> By being open to different ways of knowing and communicating, we might discover media more sophisticated than human language to communicate with dolphins and whales, not to mention among ourselves. We know that dolphins can share three-dimensional sonograms with one another, and we know that their brain structures are very similar to our own (Morton, 2002). Can humans learn to process and produce such messages? After all, humans who lose their sight at an early age can develop heightened echolocation abilities (Kassewitz et al., 2016). Given this, and the general plasticity of infant human brains, perhaps there are ways to bridge the communication abyss with dolphins.

This is the potential result of just one discovery, with one animal species. If we apply this more open-minded, egalitarian perspective in our approach to the nonhuman animals with whom we share this world, not only might we find ways to keep Earth habitable for all of its animals; just imagine the undreamt possibilities that wait to be discovered with our new eyes. As research continues in this vein, we might even develop the ability to communicate with other animals and transcend our current misnomer, *Homo sapiens*, and rejoin the Earth community as *Homo conciliator*. Maybe we will even find our way back into the great web of life.

## EPILOGUE

I grew up in the 1970s and '80s in Village Park, a thoughtfully planned and open (i.e., not gated) community in Southern California. An early incursion into native chaparral that is now endangered, it was a community surrounded by miles of native

et al., 2016, p. 1). One arresting image showed a man standing at the bottom of the aquarium; the resolution approximated that of an early television signal.

<sup>6</sup> I am reminded of the critically acclaimed science fiction film *Arrival* (2016), in which a linguist saves the world when she learns to communicate with the alien visitors whose perception of time and communication are wholly foreign to the human experience.

<sup>4</sup> *Jaws* is one of the most notable examples of the animal-based horror and its resulting mirror of production. After the release of *Jaws*, people slaughtered sharks in numbers that absolutely dwarfed the shark's death toll in the film (Ellard, 2020).

<sup>5</sup> The CymaScope is “an analog instrument in which a water-filled, fused-quartz cell is acoustically excited in the vertical axis by a voice coil motor directly coupled to the cell. The resulting wave patterns were recorded with a digital video camera” (Kassewitz

habitat that was rife with coyotes and other wildlife. To the kids in the neighborhood, it was the wilderness – and home to our fantasies and fears. When I was about ten years old, developers started razing the land in earnest. I remember walking through the newly denuded and (de)graded dirt. As I made my way home up one of the newly paved roads, I was stopped dead in my tracks by the sight of a large frog or toad who had been crushed by a large vehicle, flattened into a sundried pancake along the grey concrete gutter. I have always been a sensitive person, and that day, I was overwhelmed by the loss of that precious, innocent life. I was too naïve to understand the details, but I knew that that life had been snuffed out as a mere by-product of “progress,” and that no-human-body would mourn its loss. Nobody but me, a child who has grown into a man whose heart still aches at the endless and senseless deaths along humanity’s path toward infinite growth. I felt the weight of the world that day. Why was I, a ten-year-old, the only one who appeared to be lamenting this loss? How could it be that it was, and would remain for decades, an unknown, unaccounted for, and externalized cost that never appeared on any developer’s ledger?

I am still saddened whenever I recall this experience. Perhaps it is because the injustice it represents has only accelerated, and I have felt powerless to stop it. Today, it is not just roadkill on a small suburban street, it is megafauna dying on the superhighway of progress. It is orcas who cannot find enough fish to eat to bring their offspring to term. Or, in the increasingly rare chance that they do, it is mothers who unwittingly poison their babies with milk laden with mercury. The race for infinite growth is no longer making inroads into the wild – it has paved paradise and tainted every square inch of the world with its total disregard. Even the “maiden snow” of the arctic cannot escape the (micro) plastics of progress (Katz, 2019). Our paradigm of dominance is a dangerous illusion. It is time we try something completely different.

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