PERFORMANCE
PHILOSOPHY

WHALE GRIEF: EPISODES I + II

LAURA CULL Ó MAOILEARCA
AMSTERDAM UNIVERSITY OF THE ARTS AND UNIVERSITY OF AMSTERDAM

I: Barnum's Whales

To begin

Let me tell you a story:

Barnum's American Museum—owned by the famous showman, P. T. Barnum, located at the corner of Broadway and Ann Street in New York City, United States—opened on January 1, 1842. Among the museum's many attractions, visitors could enjoy dioramas, panoramas and "cosmoramas," a flea circus, a loom powered by a dog, Ned the learned seal, "Native Americans" who performed traditional songs and dances, and two beluga whales in an aquarium (Saxon 1989).

"Native Americans" who performed traditional songs and dances, and two beluga whales in an aquarium.

In 1861,

> *Though he had never seen a live whale before, Barnum prepared the basement of the museum as a "small ocean" to receive two belugas captured from Quebec's St. Lawrence River. He settled on a tank made of brick and cement, 40 by 18 feet…and oversaw the belugas' fitful capture and*

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journey by train to New York City in boxes filled with just enough salt water to periodically sponge their blowholes and mouths.

Two days after Barnum moved his "monsters" to his basement, they died.

The museum had accommodated the subarctic whales in tepid, noncirculating fresh water, and they had to breathe air permeated with gas lamp fumes. But the short-lived attraction bolstered Barnum's reputation so much, that he declared in his autobiography: "Thus was my first whaling expedition a great success."

Still, Barnum wasn't satisfied with his all-too-brief experiment and tried again. This time, he bribed City Hall to rig the water system to route sea water from New York Harbor to the museum. "Having a stream of salt water at [his] command at every high tide," Barnum created the world's first functional oceanarium.

He moved a new set of whales to the second floor, giving them what he figured was adequate fresh air. "I am sorry we can't make him dance a hornpipe and do all sorts of things at the word of command," Barnum told his visitors.

The water in the tank was unfiltered and dark. The whales usually remained at the bottom, hidden from the visitors, but could be seen for a moment when they surfaced to breathe.

One day, a woman attending the museum with her daughter got several quick glimpses of a whale after watching for a half hour, then marched to Barnum's office and declared: "Mr. B., it's astonishing to what a number of purposes the ingenuity of us Yankees has applied india-rubber." She insisted that the whale was actually made of india-rubber, powered by steam and machines, allowing it to surface at regular intervals and blow air through a bellows. Barnum let her believe she had cracked his secret, even telling her he was impressed that she was the only visitor shrewd enough to uncover his trick. His priority as a budding oceanarium director—as with his other amusements—was to give visitors what they came for.[1]

On July 13, 1865, Barnum's American Museum "burned to the ground in one of the most spectacular fires New York has ever seen. Animals at the museum were seen jumping from the burning building, only to be shot by police. Many of the animals unable to escape the blaze burned to death in their enclosures" (Anonymous n.d.).

As fire consumed the building, the salt water in the beluga whales' tank started boiling. Someone broke its inch-thick glass wall in hopes that the cascading water would quench the flames. Instead, the two beluga whales—captured in Canada only one week before—were beached on a scorching floor before falling to the street below as the building began to collapse. The carcasses lay rotting for several days on Broadway, far too heavy to dispose of quickly.[2]

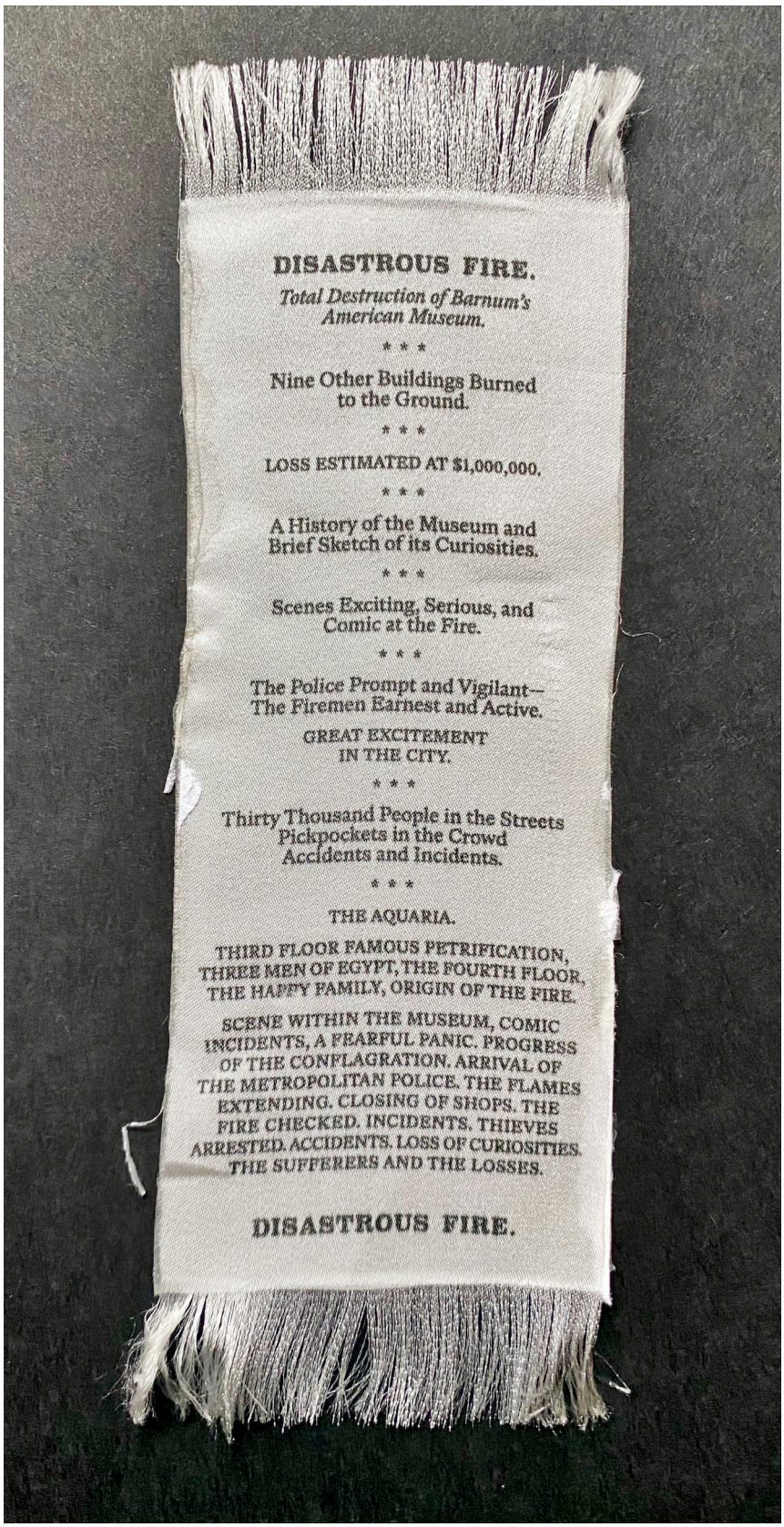

Figure 1: Bookmark by Laura Cull Ó Maoilearca in collaboration with Lucas Reif and Sarah Skaggs. As part of the expanded publication project, An [Interrupted] Bestiary (2022).

II: Orca

I Description

Take the example of J-35.

Take the example of Tahlequah.

J-35, also known as Tahlequah, is a female member of an endangered population of orcas called the Southern Resident Community who live off the coast of Washington State, in the northeastern Pacific Ocean.

A Southern Resident whale calf is born into the pod of their mother and remains in it for life. Their basic social unit is the matriline which is formed by a matriarch and all generations of her descendants. Since female whales can reach around 90 years old, as many as four generations are known to travel together. A number of matrilines then form a pod, which is an ongoing and stable traveling unit with its own dialect. Pod members use underwater calls from their dialect to maintain contact at a distance.

On July 24, 2018, Tahlequah gave birth to her second calf, Tali. When they were first spotted by an associate from the Center for Whale Research, the newborn calf was seen swimming with her mother northeast from Race Rocks.

But only half an hour later, when researchers from the Center saw the pod of orcas again near Discovery Island, Tahlequah's daughter had died and she was seen carrying her body on her rostrum.

Tahlequah proceeded to carry her newborn daughter's body across the Salish Sea for 17 days. During this time it is thought she may have travelled up to 1,000 miles—following the pod around the San Juan Islands and interior waters of British Columbia.

Several days after her daughter's death, whale researchers noted that Tahlequah had begun to look emaciated and other pod members were showing concern for her health. After the seventh day, other members began taking turns floating the calf while allowing Tahlequah to rest. By the ninth day, the calf had shown signs of visible decomposition and was becoming harder to carry. The pod disappeared for several days in early August, but were spotted again on August 8, with Tahlequah still carrying her calf after 16 days. By the following day, after 1,000 miles of swimming, Tahlequah released the calf and rejoined the pod with no apparent signs of malnutrition or ill health.

Tahlequah's unusually long period of grieving attracted international human attention and prompted calls for intervention to protect the Southern Residents community, including by removing dams that disrupt their food supply. For many, including whale biologists, Tahlequah's

behaviour was a powerful 'show of grief'; a demonstration of the complexity of animal emotions and further proof that mourning the dead is by no means exceptional to humans.

Of course, not everyone was willing to name Tahlequah's behaviour as a display of grief. Zoologist Jules Howard wrote: "if you believe J35 was displaying evidence of mourning or grief, you are making a case that rests on faith not on scientific endeavour" (Howard 2018, n.p.). He went on to say: "This might seem unreasonable and even brutally cruel to some readers but remember this behaviour has been documented only a handful of times and that, on the whole, the sea is not filled with killer whales displaying such extreme and dramatic behaviours each time a loved one dies. Compare that to human societies, all of whom undergo dramatic periods of social upheaval upon the death of friends or family. You are likely to have experienced it. You, the reader, may still be carrying the effect of death in your human heart. That's actual grief. That's actual mourning" (Ibid.).

Once again—animal emotion is measured against the standard of a normative notion of human emotion which is defined as constituting "actual grief" (or proper grief), rather than simply one species variant amongst others.

Humans are the gold standard for grief. Tahlequah merely "grieved."

Anthropocentrism is the violence of scare quotes.

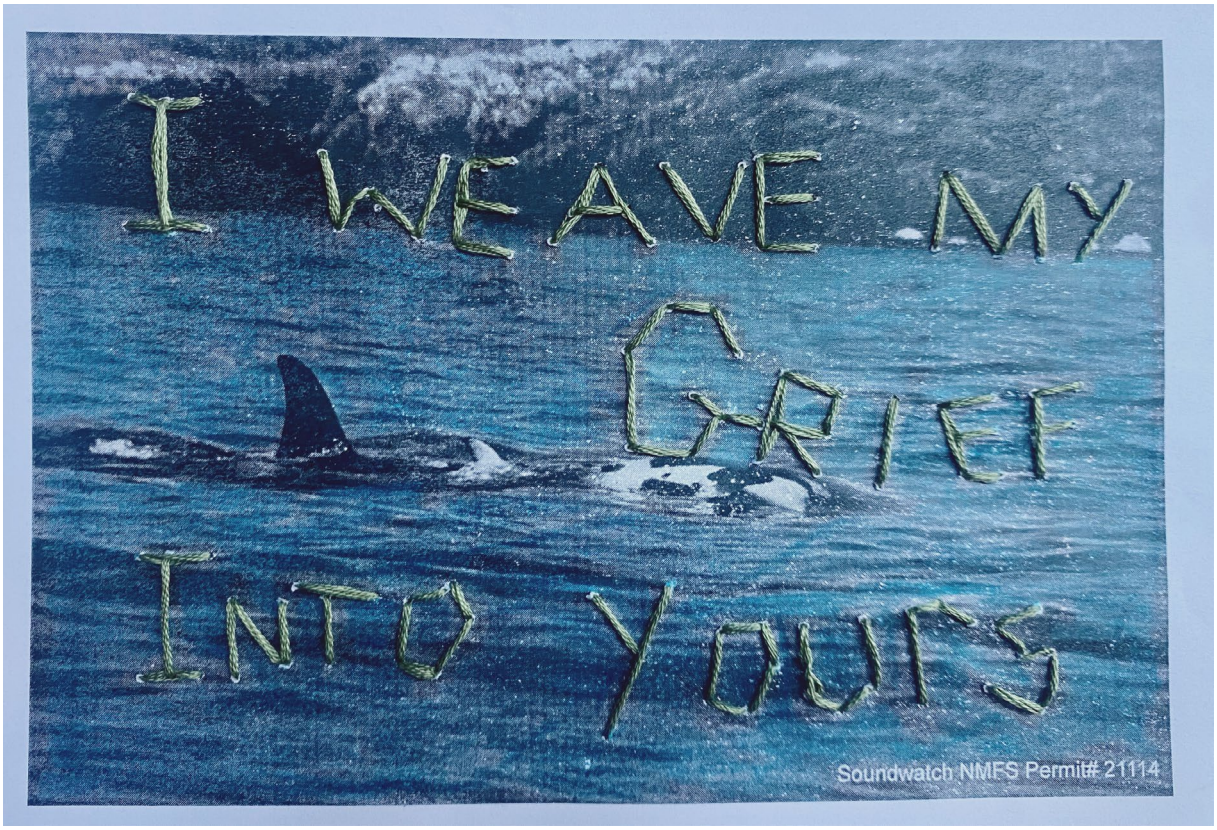

Figure 2: "I Weave My Grief Into Yours" (2024). Drawing by Laura Cull Ó Maoilearca.

II Lesson

Orca (Orcinus orca)
You teach us how to grieve

After all, the name they gave you: Orcinus means "of the kingdom of the dead"

But more importantly, you taught her how to grieve
According to matrilinearity
Tracing a kinship through mourning
As your mother taught you,
As your mother's mother taught her:

We carry the bodies.

Calves at birth weigh about 400 pounds and are about 8 foot long.

Not yet black and white like us
Your belly was still an orangey-yellow, my beautiful one
As I put you on my shoulder
As I laid you on my back
This weight I cannot be without
This weight I carry for 17 days
This weight I carry for 1,000 miles.
Not because I don't know you're gone
Not because I don't get it.
But because I loved you before I met you.
Because I lost you before I met you.
Because I lost you before I got to teach you how the salmon move with the seasons.
Because I lost you before I got to teach you how to flip the kelp with your tail.

When we do it, they call it "postmortem-attentive behavior"
When you do it, they call it grief
When we do it, they call it "epimeletic behaviour"
When you do it, they call it mourning

Take the example of this one…
Take the example of that one…
How many times do we have to show you what we are capable of for you to see it without being shown?
Why do we have to show you at all?

She says: “Just because I’m not grieving in front of you, offering up my grief for your consumption, does not mean I’m not grieving.
I’m not going to grieve in front of a public audience of people I just met.”[3]

And why should she?
Why should you?

She says: “humans and other animals have a capacity for grief that may or may not be expressed, depending on who they are, depending on the situation.”

She says: “In its Metropolitan Diary column for January 16, 2012, the *New York Times* published an account by a woman about a day she and her sister were tending a community garden in Manhattan. Another woman, known to neither sister, approached with a paper bag containing the ashes of her father. The woman asked if the ashes could be scattered in the garden, handed them the bag, and left, saying, “Here, please take this. His name was Abe, and I’ve had more than enough of him.”[4]

She says: “I just kept smelling her because she smelt so good and so different. I think I kept her blankets for over ten years just to take them out of their special box to smell them every now and then.”[5]

Orca (Orcinus orca)
You teach us how to grieve:
Always more than one[6]
They say: no permanent separation of an individual from the group has even been recorded.
Always more than one
A temporary solo in the midst of community
Always more than one
Where “I” = the memory of holding you in my water
As the water holds me in hers.

At first, I did try to do it by myself:
To hold you up at the surface of the water
To dive back down to get you when you fell
I didn’t eat
I didn’t sleep
But as I began to get exhausted
The others started standing by
Taking turns to lift you, to attend to you.
Until I regained my strength.
Always more than one.

This is how we care for our dead.

Because I'm not the first and I won't be the last.
This loss is not only mine.
Some inexplicable tragedy.

They knew and they could have done something.
He says: "There's just not enough food"
He says: "It's all that poison they put in the water"
He says: "It's miscarriage after miscarriage. And when there is a successful birth, the infant usually dies."

They knew and they could have done something.
They call it a "mis-carriage"
A mistake, an error, a going wrong
The accusation built within the word[7]
Like she dropped you.
But she's not the first and she won't be the last.
He says: "It's probably nothing"
He says: "She's probably just depressed"
He says: "Oh, actually, we got the test results and it turns out she was right."

This loss is not only theirs.
Because they're not the first and they won't be the last.
They knew and they did something.
Taking turns.
Standing by.
Let this be my way of not letting you go.
Let this be how I trace our oceanic kinship:
Re-membering our differing grieves together.[8]

Notes

[1] The italicised block text part of the story is cited in an adapted form from Bosworth (2018).

[2] Adapted from Bosworth (2018).

[3] Quote from Simpson (2024).

[4] Adapted from King (2013, 7).

[5] See Coleman (2019). Quotes are transcribed from East Side Freedom Library (2019).

[6] *Always More Than One: Individuation's Dance* is the title of a book by philosopher Erin Manning (2013).

[7] See Squires (2019). Quotes are transcribed from East Side Freedom Library (2019).

[8] I borrow the term "grieves" from artist Siegmar Zacharias.

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Biography

Laura Cull Ó Maoilearca is an artist, writer and researcher based in Amsterdam, Netherlands. She holds a joint appointment as Lector (the Dutch title for professors at applied universities) of the Academy of Theatre and Dance at Amsterdam University of the Arts, and as special Professor of Performance Philosophy at the University of Amsterdam. Her latest publications are *Interspecies Performance* (2024) co-edited with Florence Fitzgerald-Allsopp for Performance Research Books and the expanded publication project, *An [Interrupted] Bestiary* (2022). Laura is a founding core convener of the Performance Philosophy network and an editor of its journal and book series.