ON HUMPBACK WHALE SONG AND POETIC CONSTRAINT

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It was not until February that I heard them. Minor tones underwater. Plaintive. Asking for others to hear. Hear and not to act. To witness the wonder of the ways in which light and sound travel and still underwater. I felt it in my pituitary gland first. Then in my throat. A tightening and a deep reverberation. I would have missed it entirely, the winter swells in Waimea calmed enough for me to enter the clear water that day. Two local surfers called out to me, "If you put your head underwater you can hear the humpbacks signing to each other. Try listen."

I waited for a wave to break, then before the next one rose up, I jumped through the backclap and past the churn into the clear blue and dove and cleared my ears. The sandy ocean floor in Waimea Bay has a steep incline. The ridges on the ocean floor show the map of water patterns. Underneath, my entire body thrummed with whale song. High screeches and low moans. A scratchy staccato pattern. Grunts. Humpback voices carry for miles and miles and once could be heard across the world, when once upon a time, there was a quiet ocean.

Submerged, I opened my eyes and felt the song move through me. What they communicated to one another was a mystery to me, as it is to scientists still, but felt familiar in that it was as if the vibrations stimulated the noise production mechanisms of my own body. What is known to scientists is that whales sing in groups, whale songs are comprised of units, twisted into themes, woven into phrases, and repeated into songs. When other whales hear the season's new song in Hawaiian waters, they learn it, phrase by phrase, creating new sounds that rhyme and riff on the song in their own renditions. At the end of the seasonal migration, the humpbacks in an area will have learned and will continue to sing the same song as their friends in the area.

From Hawai'i, from off of Waimea Bay the subspecies of the North Pacific Humpback Whale will migrate 3,500 miles to Alaska for the summer algal blooms which beckon krill, sardines, and other fish they eat. This group are opportunity feeders, meaning when they arrive in the winter months (October to May), they do not plan on eating much, filter feeding, taking gigantic mouthfuls of water, pushing it out through their baleen, and licking it clean of crustaceans and fish. But this was all book knowledge that I had, not experiential knowledge. I did not know the Hawaiian stories about this animal yet. But there in the water, I heard what I could in the language of my own body.

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I was plunged into a quest after understanding what moved me so about being in the crossfire of songs. It felt holy, like the cetacean vibrations were sacralizing the space through sound. I wanted to hear the songs again and again and again. I went often that February to Waimea Bay and stopped hearing the songs by late March or early April. But the question haunted me, *can the human animal really ever understand the patterns of communication of other species?*

But was I hearing a *song* song? Isn't that a human understanding of a specific kind of communication? In her book *Whale Song* in the Object Lesson series, Margret Grebowicz says,

> *Music invents the listener first of all by turning listening into an injunction: you must. Why would there be music at all, were it not because you must listen to it? But who is this creature that must listen? Szendy asks, "What place does a music work assign to its listener? How does it require us to list it [*sic*]? What means does it put* into play to compose a listening*? But also: What scope, what space for* play *does a work reserve, in itself, for those who play it or hear it, for those who* interpret *it, with or without instruments?" (Grebowicz 86–87).*

This is a deeply interpretive act after the humpback whale song created of me a listener. I was invented as hearer of a song by the fact of its being sung or even sounded by the humpbacks miles offshore. Because I listen, it becomes a song through the paradigm of my own human mind. To me this opened up the discursive space of poetry—its plasticity, its futurity, its speculation could possibly hold the paradox. Poetry invents a listener of me, and as I write poems, I become a creator of exponential expansion of consciousness. But how to treat the song as an ephemeral, living performance by beings that are not objects? How could the form of the poem hold the ecology of this mammal as well as my own speech? "David Rothenberg . . . insists that whales are in fact singing rather than speaking and refers to whale songs as 'art'" (Grebowicz 93).

I am not of the heart that believes that my brown, queer writing about these animals is exploitative or reproducing the same exploitation wrought on the biosphere by white colonization and American imperialism. Rather, this act is one of making sense of my own world through understanding my affective responses to the natural world, long denied to BIPOC in favor of white access to resources.

There have been many calculations made by the mechanized global capitalist, white, consumer about the magic of the whale song. According to Rebecca Giggs, before our noise-polluting industries of machines in water, "ships were quieter, and being made of timber, their hulls acted as amplifiers. Shipmen claimed to have detected all manner of mythical creatures caroling in the ocean" (153). Why not lend my own imagination to what the first experiences of these songs could have meant for my ancestors kept in cargoholds as they journeyed, bound and bonded, across the Bay of Bengal, the Indian Ocean, the Southern Ocean, the Atlantic Ocean, and the Caribbean Sea? In those hulls, I imagine them hearing these songs for the first time—chilling them or singing them into their new lives.

The fact that the whale utters, means that there is either emotion or listener, or both. In this configuration the communicative nature of this "art" excited in my mind endless possibilities. Giggs goes on to say that whale song might mean something different depending on where it is projected: its loudness or quietness also adds meaning and nuance (158–159). She continues:

> *Imagine if what a word denoted depended not only on how that word was spelled, how it sounded, and whether it was whispered or whether it was yelled, but also where on the page it was placed. Don't we know that form already, reader? Don't we call it a poem? (Giggs 159).*

The poems that I thought to write were that: hypothesizing and provisional; the quandary entirely (and literally) lyric experimentation—using my reckless imagination. Implicated here: time, space, human rationalization, and the Unknown. The queer potential of this transspecies writing is by its very nature asking a set of problematics to emerge from below the surface, to breach and splash about in wildness and abandon.

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In *The Art of Recklessness*, poet Dean Young wanders through the thinking of what poetry does: intention and imagination. He calls for

> *a poetry that arises out of recklessness and is composed of convictions of first needs, first minds, of truth in language arising from the active impulse of emotion, moving through the calculations of the rational toward irrational detonation (12).*

Thus, poetry is inexorably linked through its own realization and discovery to its death and destruction. For Young all poetry is reaction to its contexts—what's come before sought out to be destroyed, or to be sublimated into a newer state of realization for both reader and poet. Such contradictions are evidenced in the ruins of Sappho's poems that come to us through fragments. These fragments, though pulverized through the survival of violence, are powerful from their making and unmaking, their upending of consistency, coherence, and queer possibility. The same can be said of formal constraints on the poetic line and writing: how the act of creating the poem, the self as a poet, and the reader is itself also a reaction to contexts of the poet.

Whether through fractures, disjoints, fissures, juxtaposition, irreverence, or assertions, the goal of the poem is to play with magic. Dean Young writes,

> *The futility of existence is related to the inability of identity, of subject, to take on the stability of authority and knowledge, of insight, to not be a victim of itself, the jarring loose of the single vanishing point meaning the vanishing of god [123–124] . . . But to convince me the self is decentered is far from proving that the self does not exist. The self may in fact have too many centers, and that is the source of much of our psychological stress but also of our great diversion, our capacity for change, creativity, empathy, love, and joy [125].*

So the question remains for the poet: how do you write any self: one's own, another, or another animal? How do you write into the fractures and gaps, using as inspiration "the heterogeneity of

social constructs, emotional being, that took as its central notion a fluid, expanding, contradictory, inclusive nature" (137)? For me, I find this question through the velocity of poem-as-inquiry, through poetic play and imagination, constraint and form invoking the formless god at the temple—a wild fish, a sounding whale.

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What is poetic form? Can it wield this eco-critical aesthetic question? For Marcia Southwick writing about bird song, she relies on "regularity" to produce meaning, something she finds similar to the way that poetry works. She says,

> *Poetic voice is forever hovering along the border between randomness and regularity, searching for just the right tension between them. This balancing act between regularity and randomness produces the mystery and strangeness of voice in poetry, and creates, as a silent counterpart, a distinct individualized* form. *(Southwick 110)*

It is through the regularity and randomness that patterns are created, are recognized, and thought of as communicating meaning, according to Southwick. This is the starting place of my excavation of a poetic that can hold the poet-as-human's and the poet-as-whale's voice.

Southwick, when describing birdsong, speaks to poet craft:

> *But all good poetry has "rules" or fundamental strategies that create consistency and unity. The consistency can be accomplished by choosing repetitive methods of creation—and those methods might not be detectable (Southwick 114).*

And these "rules"—and in the case that I am writing on, "poetic constraint"—activate the poet's imagination, pushing them beyond the boundaries of the expected. I am often astonished by how my language bends when I think through constraint, how each word and phrase must be reached for with deliberate attention and intention while following the intuition that leads me there. This act is a wonder.

One of the rules for the "song"-poem is repetition of sound through assonance and rhyme. The echo of sound is important to me in order to keep the poem in alignment with the structure of whale song. For Giggs,

> *Repetition is a key feature of what we call "song," defined, in mathematical terms, as patterned sound. Specific sets of notes, phrases, and refrains reoccur throughout the songs of individual whales, giving their noises structure, a type of scansion, and musicality. From time to time, humpbacks rhyme. (Giggs 157).*

I created a rudimentary poetic form, mining marine biologists' research for structural gestures and information, to craft for myself the constraints that I needed in order to free my mind through artistic challenge. Staying in my own queer phenomenological unaversive, I do not attempt to speak for the whale—just for the speaker who queers national belongings, space, species, genre, and genders. Using my own human voice and tools of poetry craft, I was surprised by the way spontaneity, magic, and regularity were added to my poems.

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Whales do not have voice boxes or cords to produce sound. Up until recently it was not completely clear how humpbacks croon out. They have no lips. "Instead, air cycles from within the red sacs of its lungs, up toward the whale's dark head, then back and forth, vibrating across a U-shaped ridge of cartilage, which also forms an aperture into a laryngeal pouch that the whale contracts or expands, changing its resonance" (Giggs 161).

No one has a scientific reason for *why* whales sing. The reasons are all educated speculations. And how can we possibly understand the cetacean mind from our own limited perception from our own *Umwelt*? The observable is not always observable without the proper mechanisms to observe the objective *thing*. What can language do that is not awkward approximation? I am reminded of Mark Doty's words in *The Art of Description* about time, space, the animal, and the lyric. He says,

> *It must be in part the wordlessness of creatures. Our speech rushes in where there are no words, and in the process we understand that our acts of description are both bridges to animal life and evidence of our distance from them. The very tool we reach for to approach them holds us at bay (Doty 29–30).*

In looking for words I will never find them because they are not of their own phenomenological configuration.

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I base the lines of these whale-song poems on a structure that was compiled by Mercado, Herman, and Pack in 2003 in an article called "Stereotypical Sound Patterns in Humpback Whale Song: Usage and Function." This article accounts for the composition of the species' singing as art, according to the scientist Roger Payne, who released the first record of whale song, *Songs of the Humpback Whale*, in 1970. He wrote that humpback whales "perform for performance's sake" (*Voices in the Sea*). Humpback songs are constituted of units, phrases, themes, and organized into songs and then into song structures. I have used this idea of the parsed humpback song to form a poetic and sometimes irregular form. Humpback whale songs build on each segment and the assemblage of particular patterns, through the repetition of sounds and arrangement of these parts. Roger Payne and Rebecca Giggs even remark that humpback whale songs rhyme.

According to the cetacean biologists Mercado and Payne, a unit may be envisioned as the "notes" of the "song." A collection of "units" is called a "phrase" (up to ten seconds); the "phrase" will be repeated into what is called a "theme." It's a collection of "themes" that are known as "songs," which will last up to thirty minutes each. Units of song I have interpreted to mean syllables (5–10 per line); phrases are lines (with a rhyme scheme; roughly ten syllables though this is not exact, an irregularity that allows for the irregularity in whale song); themes are stanzas (tercets with exception of the last); and the song is a poem (7–20 minutes/lines in length). The rhyme structure is accomplished through assonance as well as direct and slant rhyme to allow the poem a more organic cohesion, something wrought tightly but with some give. The "rhyme" scheme that I developed is almost directly from the Mercado et al. study.

(AAA / BCB/) CBC / DED / EFF / DED / EFF / G

5–10 syllables per line
unit = syllable
phrase = line
theme = stanza
song = poem

Humpback whale song's rhyme sense leaves the listener in a place that is not sonically familiar. In fact, the "G" as the last line of the whale-song poem is a grand departure from the rest of the song—a kind of poetic "anti-closural" gesture asking for response.

According to this study, whale songs also have a specific rhyming pattern. By "translating" the scientific mapping of whale song into a formal poem I am able to envision what the words of these songs can be. In these poems the speaker is a human/whale, a complete migrant with dark skin. This formal poem is echoic of the effect of whale song on human bodies, like that time in Waimea Bay where what I felt I kept. The themes of these poems are based on interpretations of my own memory and affective experiences. When I listen to the whale song I envision the whale moaning, howling, crying, longing, wailing, feeling separation, and being desirous of sex. This is the thematic structure of these poems that I write.

Song is important to both human and whale as both species have complex reasons to sing and perform. In their book *The Cultural Lives of Whales and Dolphins*, biologists Hal Whitehead and Luke Rendell gesture at the possibility of a whale "culture" that must be understood on its own terms—outside of the experiences of humans. And for some, this presents no challenge to understanding it as "culture," as songs are performed as art (Grebowicz, Giggs). Thomas Nagel, in his article "What Is It Like to Be a Bat?", agrees that we can understand it as culture from our human vantage point(s), but the fact remains of animal phenomenology: "no matter how the form may vary, the fact that an organism has conscious experience *at all* means, basically, that there is something it is like to *be* that organism" (Nagel 436).

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The story I tell here is one of migration and settling in a place and allowing the self to be "transformed." The poem ends with the explicit awareness of the physical location of where the speaker is now: a total (and sonic) displacement of where the poem starts. The poem does not end with the last line; rather, it projects into a dare for the listener/reader it creates to respond in kind. Like in humpback vocalizations, there is a regularization; this form employs their loose adherence to formal structure. I use them to incite the poem, riffing off of the previous poem.

I wrote as many as five whale-song poems a week for four years and came up with many that were tightly bound and many that inhabited the spirit of spontaneity as a guiding principle: to follow the intuition to see where the poem leads. Some of these poems did what I hoped, others taught me that I was not listening to my subconscious mind, but rather trying to wrangle the poem into what my conscious mind thought it wanted—thinking that I could write a *good* poem. O what human foolishness. I can only describe the poem that emerged after writing them all.

My use of the image and the metaphor of the Whale attempts to go beyond what William Carlos Williams calls "crude symbolism" in that subjectivity is what is questioned in the relationship between the speaker and the reader. I attempt to blur the line of what a human can know through first-person experience. But the irony here is that I do not even necessarily believe that I need to refute the types of "acceptable" poetry that Williams advocates, as we are in an era where such reliance on canonical axioms is what is crude. I have only relatively recently, after all, been seen as human by the West. There have been many others like me who have migrated in

such a way as to remember the poetic lineages of our folk songs, but few have written as poets from the United States.

And yet there is something that refuses forward or backward motion in these lyric experimentations. Maybe, as Mark Doty suggests, time does something different in the poem: that the poem exists outside of time as we understand it. This is the magic of poetry. He says,

> *But there is another sort of temporality, too, which is timelessness. In this lyric time we cease to be aware of forward movement; lyric is concerned neither with the impingement of the past nor with anticipation of events to come. It represents instead a slipping out of story and into something still more fluid, less linear: the interior landscape of reverie (Doty 22).*

I could only aspire to write poems that perform these kinds of spells. With the whale-song form, this is possible: existing in the realm of the imagination outside of the temporality of human chronological linearity and in the added dimensions of being able to travel up and down the water column in a way that living on dry land makes impossible.

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Whalesong

Silt fogs my eye's **anemome**.
It's clear I can't see you. A bird sticks
my pipes, its feathers, **reach** down

surgeon's fingers **trick**-clowning
ventral pleats. Do you find a Mars
heart ablaze inside my **quick**, a hazy

thing drowned in wine? Your arm
so deep, it **chokes** my fist-sized throat.
I cut this song's **mooring** to sail

for your ear, its **acoustic** birth fading,
dawn's dusky fate. What scintillates
at start, sinks to fossil's **lithic**

stone. What once berthed your body
sea-changed into **hollow** imprint
and at the far **shore**, **alone**,
cries out in loss's slate **froth**.

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Five years after I first heard the whales singing off Waimea Bay, I return. But it is October. The whales are on their way back to these Hawaiian waters. The United States military has poisoned the fresh waters here at Red Hill. The military exercise RIMPAC just occurred in June. On Maui, development threatens the already depleted aquifer of Wailea. The U.S. public goes on its daily life in the throes of the pandemic.

I go to Waimea Bay with an old friend, and we scan the horizon for the telltale puffs of breath that shoot fifteen feet into the air: the mist rising into the sky like ghosts.

"It's too early for whales, yeah?" Amalia says.

"They're on their way," I agree with her.

"They are probably singing already." She smiles and puts back on her sunglasses. "Weren't you just in Alaska? You should have asked them when they are coming."

"I don't think they understood me," I said.

"Maybe you should have sung to them, then. You should go in the water." Amalia motions to the turquoise bay. I strip off my shirt and throw down my glasses. I will hear them singing even if they are not yet here. Their song will come from all directions. It's like how I hear the Bhojpuri songs I learned from my elders. I keep all these songs inside me, echoing.

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[AND *BOROS*, FROM *BORA*, WHICH IN GREEK MEANS *FOOD*]

JUSTIN RIGAMONTI

and *boros*, from *bora*, which in Greek means *food*,
as in *tail food*, which is strange because usually
food is thought of as something other than self,
but the larger you become, the more cosmos
you comprise, the less consumable otherness
there is, a shrinking slice of not-you, until
you're the whole thing, the world serpent, *ouro*
boros, the yin and yang, the mouth of light
coiled back into the darkness of your body,
which you've always felt, guessed at, your mind not
a discrete slice of consciousness splayed out
on cosmic glass, but all of it, one bright cell
inside of god and therefore all god, your name
implying oneness, the word for tail, *ouro*

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