Barry Lopez's 'A Presentation of Whales': Examining Lopez's text alongside visual and audio representations of whales.

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Barry Lopez's 'A Presentation of Whales' (1989) explores the strange and surreal event of the beaching of forty-one sperm whales on the Oregon coast.[1] Lopez's writing stretches beyond portraying the whales, to a wider consideration of how humans understand these creatures. David Simpson writes on Moby-Dick that 'as a living whole the whale cannot be imaged. Even direct experience…provides only a "tolerable idea" of the whale's identity'.[2] As Lopez explores the difficulties and limitations in our recognition of the whales, we can read this text alongside Joel Sternfeld's photography of the event, and the album *Songs of the Humpback Whale* (1970) to suggest the importance of imagination in human conception of the whale.

In his recounting and representation of the events that transpired, there is a persistent, yet latent tone of Lopez's piece being critical of 'science' and the limitations of human knowledge. As the scientists arrived to the coast 'with specimen bags and rubber gloves and fishing knives' (p. 698), Lopez creates an initial impression of them being driven and motivated by these tools. The listing of these specialist utensils creates a clinical and distant emotional or affective positioning of the scientists. Indeed, 'specimen bags' and 'rubber gloves' are a physical manifestation of these layers and boundaries between the scientists and the whales. Although there is a notable unease and alienation in the distance and wariness of the scientists to the whales, there is concurrently a cruelty in the proximity of other observers, as Lopez describes how 'by midnight, the curious and the awed were crowded on the beach, cutting the night with flashlights' (p. 698). While 'the curious and the awed' appear to be innocent, there is a sense of the destruction and disturbance of their intervention at the beach through their 'cutting the night' with torches. This becomes more explicit through the image of the 'drunks, ignoring the whales' sudden thrashing, were trying to walk up and down their backs' (p. 698). In contrast to the removal of the scientists from the whales' bodies, the drunks show no awareness of the boundaries of the whales or recognition for their physical autonomy, but see them as part of the landscape to 'walk up and down'. In this way, Lopez's writing is curious and constantly raises questions for the reader - no individual or group of people seems to be acting appropriately, or without any kind of resultant harm. Despite being well-intentioned, the initial representation of the scientists is of them being sterile and constrained by the bureaucracy of wider institutions, while there is an evident hurt and injury from the actions of the crowds of

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[1] Barry Lopez, 'A Presentation of Whales' in *American Earth: Environmental Writing since Thoreau,* ed. by Bill McKibben (New York: Library of America, 2008), 696-715. All further references are to this edition.
[2] David Simpson, *Fetishism and Imagination: Dickens, Melville, Conrad*, (Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), p. xi.

onlookers watching the events at the beach unfurl. In this way, Lopez's writing does not focus directly on the spectacle of the whales and their suffering, but with how humans respond to the tragedy of the beached whales.

As Greg Garrard has argued that 'animal studies subjects both humanity and animality to simultaneous critique', Lopez sets his discerning tone, as he writes that 'in the days that followed, the worst and the best of human behaviour was shown among them' (p. 699), and both the whales and the human observers are the object of Lopez's examination.[3] Photography and images of the whales run throughout the text (for instance, by the press, scientists documenting the whales, and tourists approaching the beach), prompting consideration of the function and effect of the act of photography. While Lopez's lyrical descriptions of the whales demand an attentiveness, a detailed focus, the act of photographing distances individuals from the scene of suffering. Anne-Emmanuelle and Marta Segarra draw attention to the value and importance of the lyrical mode of Lopez's writing, as they argue that '"poetic thinking" can give language to animals without appropriating them, without falling into the trap of the "fable"'.[4] By contrast, Susan Sontag has explained how the modern proliferation of photography has resulted in emotional distance and dissonance; on seeing something remarkable, and 'unsure of other responses, they take a picture. This gives shape to the experience: stop, take a photograph, and move on'.[5] This dissonance created by photography between the suffering of the whales and absence of genuine compassion from the human witnesses is shown by Lopez's description of 'a journalist, one of the last two or three, asked somebody to take her picture while she stood with a small poodle in her arms in front of the burning pits' (p. 714). In this moment, the whales' corpses have become merely a background. Lopez earlier writes that:

> The temptation to possess – a Polaroid of oneself standing over a whale, a plug of flesh removed with a penknife, a souvenir squid beak plucked deftly from an exposed intestine by a scientist – was almost palpable in the air. (p. 704)

Here, it seems particularly striking that a photograph is equated with physical violation of the whales, and there is an advancement and progression from the initial representation of the people present at the scene somewhat unknowingly or unwittingly violating the agency of the whales, and the very decisive, precisely intentioned actions of disembodiment here as parts of the whales are 'plucked deftly'. The equation of photographing the whales with physical violation presents the whales as creatures with spiritual agency, individuality and subjectivity, as Gary Kowalski argues that 'animals not only have biologies; they also have biographies. We can appreciate the lives of

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[3] Greg Garrard, *Ecocriticism*, (Routledge, 2004), p.170. E-book edition.
[4] Anne-Emmanuelle Berger and Marta Segarra, *Demenageries : Thinking (of) Animals After Derrida*, (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2011), p. 12.
[5] Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, (London: Penguin, 2008), p. 10.

animals, but not appropriate them, for they have their own lives to lead'.[6] Lopez's text is compelling as he does not directly take an ethical or political standpoint in the narratorial voice of the text, but presents this conflict as it stands to readers, as he represents both biology and biography of the whales, and the complicated relation between them. Similarly, Lopez draws attention to the complicated matter of how we represent the whales in culture. While Lopez demonstrates his own 'poetic language', he also presents the sensationalist and exposing representation of the whales by those with cameras.

Lopez images the whales through the reactions to them; the provoking of such strong and varied responses speaks to the awe and unfathomability of the whales. Garrard surmizes John Berger's 'Why Look at Animals?' (2009): 'when we look at animals, they may return our gaze, and in that moment we are aware of both likeness and difference'.[7] On the same work of criticism, P. D. Smith argues that 'what concerns Berger is the loss of a meaningful connection to nature, a connection that can now only be rediscovered through the experience of beauty: "the aesthetic moment offers hope"'.[8] In this way, while Garrard highlights the dialogue existing between humans and animals prompting self-reflection, Smith is more discerning and specific in seeing this redemption for Berger as being through 'the aesthetic moment'. Although Berger's writing is influential and important in its early consideration of the human relation to and representation of animals in art, there is a limitation to where aesthetics and beauty can take us. Indeed, this story of Lopez's is not a work of fiction, but nature writing, and perhaps could be aligned with a form of journalism. Instead, Lopez proposes affect and compassion as an ethics for the relation of humans and their encounters with animals. Moments of genuine connection between individual people and the whales create authenticity and depth to Lopez's writing, indicated by 'someone thoughtful among them [who] ran the ribbon close enough to one whale to allow people to peer into the dark eyes' (p. 704). Lopez's authorial voice shifts from recounting and onlooking events, to becoming a conduit and amplifier for those engaged with the whales: '"the best thing we could have done," Piper said, alluding to this, "was offer our presence, to be with them while they were alive, to show some compassion"' (p. 702). The emotional reactions from scientists are particularly important - while they are hounded for answers and resolutions for the beached whales (despite recognizing their lacking knowledge) they are rarely given space to process their witnessing of such suffering:

> The fact that almost anything learned was likely to be valuable was meager consolation to scientists hurt by charges that they were cold and brutal people, irreverently jerking fetuses from the dead. Among these scientists were people who sat alone in silence, who departed in anger, and who broke down and cried. (p. 706)

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[6] Gary A. Kowalski, 'Somebody not something: do animals have souls?' in *This Sacred Earth; Religion, Nature, Environment* ed. by Roger S. Gottlieb, (New York: Routledge, 1996), p. 316.
[7] Garrard, p. 152.
[8] P. D. Smith, 'Why Look at Animals? by John Berger', *The Guardian*, 19th September 2009 <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2009/sep/19/why-look-animals-john-berger>, accessed 22.05.21.

Importantly, Lopez does not give any judgement for the varied responses and reactions of the scientists, implying that while the way that people experience and process different emotions may look different, it is the compassionate intention that characterises it. Deborah Duffield is quoted:

> it hurt me more than watching human beings die. I couldn't cope with the pain, the futility…. I just turned into myself. It brought out the scientist in me. (p. 711)

There is an ambiguity and undecidedness to Duffield's quote, which seems central to the relationship between science and compassion that Lopez is exploring. One reading could lead us towards the sense that as a result of the emotional turmoil of witnessing the suffering, the experience 'brought out the scientist' in Duffield in order to enable her to continue the work at hand, and that as she 'just turned into myself', she also turned away from the whales. Another interpretation, however, could be that it is in Duffield's moment of self-reflection and internal awareness, recognising herself as a scientist is what allows her to witness 'the pain, the futility' of the whales in its unfathomable entirely. It is through these reactions that we comprehend the scale of the whales and their turmoil. Even if sperm whales are too mysterious and difficult for us as readers to imagine, we are able to empathise and identify with the emotions of the scientists.

The universality of suffering is shown as Lopez recounts:

> … one incident that broke scientific concentration and brought with it a feeling of impropriety. Several scientists had started to strip blubber from a dead whale. Suddenly the whale next to it began pounding the beach with its flukes. The pounding continued for fifteen minutes – lifting and slamming the flukes to the left, lifting and slamming the flukes to the right. When the animal quieted, they resumed work. (p. 711)

Here, it is as if the whale is communicating in a way that humans can understand. Indeed, as Jonathan Burt encourages a challenging of 'the traditional dividing line whereby man is a linguistic animal and animals are not', perhaps this can be read in this moment.[9] There is the sense that the whale's pounding is a form of linguistics, or at the very least a communicative body language. Berger and Segarra further interrogate our assumptions and expectations of the voice of animals, in their argument that 'if animals "write," then they cannot be said to be "mute," even though they don't "speak,' that is, even though they don't have what we call articulate language'.[10] In both of these critical readings, and through Lopez's text, there is the suggestion and encouragement for us, as humans, to listen to animals and truly acknowledge these alternative non-linguistic modes of communication, more reliant on affect and intuition. The whale's evident distress suggests a cognisance of its surroundings – the implication being that the whale is aware of its dead

[9] Jonathan Burt, 'John Berger's "Why Look at Animals?": A Close Reading', *Worldviews*, 9.22, (2005), pp. 203-218, (p. 208).
[10] Berger and Segarra, p. 4.

companion, and aware of the harm and violation of the scientists stripping its body. The focus here is solely on the whale's flukes, while in another moment it is at 'the blowhole of one of the whales' (711), and it is whales' teeth that repeatedly hold their value. The physical whale cannot be imaged as a living whole, only in its composite parts, but through intimate moments of compassion and connection there is a taking-in of the entire creature.

The initial publication of Lopez's text in *Harper's Magazine* (March 1980) was printed alongside Joel Sternfeld's photographs (see Appendix), prompting consideration of the relationship between these words and images. As Jonathan Burt also draws attention to 'the manipulation and hybridisation of the animal body', this becomes particularly acute through examining the visual reproduction of the whales' bodies.[11] Is there an irony in reading Lopez's criticism of photojournalists alongside Sternfeld's photographs? They are exemplary of the media Lopez writes about, as the suffering of the whales and violence is evident in the numbers painted on their fins (Fig. 3) or the whale's body on fire (Fig. 4), as Lopez describes. While one interpretation of these photographs sees them as exploitative of the whales' suffering, furthering the spectacle of their pain, there is simultaneously an implication and gesturing towards the limits of our comprehension of the whale in these images, and the consensus of a lack of understanding of the event which Lopez has written of. Sternfeld's photographs enable us to perceive outlines of the whales, or identify a fin, but they are also abstract displays of colour and expanses of shades of blue, grey, and pink, evidencing Sontag's assessment that 'the camera makes reality atomic, manageable, and opaque. It is a view of the world which denies interconnectedness, continuity, but which confers on each moment the character of mystery'.[12] In Sternfeld's photojournalistic images (Fig. 1 – 4), the camera has obscured the view of the whales as whole beings, but in siphoning their bodies into 'atomic, manageable' pieces enhances their 'character of mystery', in being something alien and other to us as viewers.

As well as the photographs in *Harper's*, Sternfeld published an image from the event in *American Prospects* (1987) (Fig. 5). Antigoni Memou argues of a later project 'it is the way that Sternfeld decided to treat the issue of violence that places him in total opposition to any photojournalistic project', evident also through the contrast between the photographs published in *Harper's* and *American Prospects*.[13] The images in Harper's are hyperfocused on the whales and the visceral physicality of their suffering through close framing entirely on the whales' bodies, with little negative space. This is a stark contrast to 'approximately 17 of 41 Sperm Whales that Beached and Subsequently Died, Florence, Oregon', where the composition and structure places emphasis

[11] Burt, p. 204.
[12] Sontag, p. 23.
[13] Antigoni Memou, 'Globalisation and the Art Photography of Joel Sternfeld', *Photographies*, 5:1, (2012), pp. 3-18, (p. 11).

on the sky and beach rather than the whales themselves. This expanded scope of vision does not force our view on to the whales' suffering, but encourages a softer, lingering gaze. The beached whales are present on the coastline alongside the people walking on the beach, creating a sense of 'interconnectedness, continuity' between this unique event and the 'human' world, which Sontag implies photography denies. Perhaps rather than considering photography as a singular and general field, there are important distinctions and characteristics across different genres. The images in *Harper's* are journalistic, intended for publication and alongside public reportage of the story. As Lopez describes the sensationalist focus of the press present at the scene, this is represented also in Sternfeld's images. By contrast, the photograph published in *American Prospects* does not have the contextual pressures of being used as part of the journalistic representation of the event of the whales' beaching. There is no urgency to explicitly show the viewer the violence and pain of the whales, but Sternfeld creates space for the viewer's own contemplation of the tragedy; we do not need to see the graphic suffering of the whales to imagine it. By examining the contrasts and conflicts that exist within Sternfeld's images, considering Sontag's view of the camera denying 'interconnectedness, continuity', we must refine criticism of photography further. Photography in its entirety is not the problem, but the intention or motivation behind the lens characterises the resulting image. In 'Approximately 17 of 41 Sperm Whales that Beached and Subsequently Died, Florence, Oregon', it is as if the camera itself is not intrusive to the scene, but instead looking with compassion, openness and imagination, to encourage a similar compassion from the viewer to the plight of the whales.

Imagination is central to the importance and success of Roger Payne's *Songs of the Humpback Whale* (1970). This album is not 'man-made', but recordings of the whale's song, and Payne has said that "what I wanted to do was build them [whales] into human culture".[14] The album's enduring value comes from the imaginative space created through the act of listening and encounter between human and whale. Hearing the evocative whale-song provides an opportunity to witness the whales in their natural state, alive, and not focused on the spectacle of their suffering. Perhaps this attentiveness is innate to audio material rather than photography because it requires a commitment to a duration of time, whereas an image captures a single moment. Similarly, Burt critiques John Berger's 'look' towards animals as it 'is singularly conceived and thus limited to a single instant rather than understood as something that might be developed over time.'[15] David Rothenberg considers how the investment involved in the process of recording provokes an expansive and emotional response in the listener; these audio recordings are unique because 'Film crews rarely have the time to get the best, and scientists often have too much to do and not enough

[14] Michael May, 'Recordings That Made Waves: The Songs That Saved The Whales', *NPR,* 26th December 2014 <https://www.npr.org/2014/12/26/373303726/recordings-that-made-waves-the-songs-that-saved-the-whales?t=1608320108690&t=1609960479423>, accessed 06.01.21
[15] Burt, p. 207.

days in the field,' and are also are distinct from our idea of music as some of these sounds strain the limits of human aesthetic sense'.[16] Indeed, Berger and Segarra also draw attention to the fact that:

> The human hierarchy of the senses, in which vision prevails over all, can be different in animals, for whom scent and sound acquire other perceptual and cognitive functions than for human beings. (p.18)

In particular, they highlight 'that sound is a powerful means of deterritorialization, in the sense of making territory "flexible" and "changeable"'.[17] Perhaps it could be said that the experience of listening to whale song is one of deterritorialization, and that it is in this dislocation of the listener to a more 'flexible', liminal phenomenological space that enables greater compassion to whales. Hearing whale song encourages a relationship with animals similar to the spiritual recognition proposed by Kowalski as he writes that 'just as a symphony is more than the individual notes that compose it, a *somebody* is more than a set of behaviors or biochemical reactions.'[18] Lopez closes: 'the whales made a sound, someone had said, like the sound a big fir makes breaking off the stump just as the saw is pulled away. A thin screech' (p. 715). This suggests that perhaps there is something enchanting about whale song, in all its mystery, contributing to this 'tolerable idea' of the whale.

As Burt notes 'that the killing of animals is not in itself problematic, providing it is done in a world in which an intimacy exists between man and animal', this is what Lopez implies that we should be striving for.[19] When faced with impossibilities of knowledge, imagination is a means of creating understanding. As Burt explains the detrimental repercussions of 'the attitude of modern alienated man', Lopez's text highlights the importance of imagination and compassion in human conception of whales when we are at the limits of knowledge. Indeed, Lopez points towards the lack of appreciation or recognition of the value in genuine compassion from its absence at tragedy of the beaching:

> As far as I know, no novelist, no historian, no moral philosopher, no scholar of Melville, no rabbi, no painter, no theologian had been on the beach. No one had thought to call them or fly them in. (p. 715)

While we may assume 'knowledge' and 'understanding' to belong to the realm of science, Lopez suggests that these other professions have a form of knowledge that has been overlooked at this event, not based in hard facts, but rooted in compassion and generosity towards other beings. In considering Lopez's text alongside Sternfeld and Payne's work, we can see the effect of these

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[16] David Rothenberg. 'Nature's greatest hit: The old and new songs of the humpback whale', *Wire,* September 2014 <https://www.thewire.co.uk/in-writing/essays/nature_sgreatest-hit_the-old-and-new-songs-of-the-humpback-whale>, accessed 06.01.21.
[17] Ibid.
[18] Kowalski, p. 317.
[19] Burt, p. 208.

various creative mediums towards a similar goal. While we could look at each of these works individually, there is greater value in considering how the cumulation of these different forms of culture (literature, photography, audio) contribute towards a ‘tolerable idea’ of the whale, encouraging compassion in our approach and the use of imagination to fill the gaps in our perception.

Appendix

Fig. 1. Joel Sternfeld, *Harper's Magazine* (March 1980), p. 69 <https://www.joelsternfeld.net/essays-source/2020/4/9/a-presentation-of-whales>, accessed 06.01.21.

Fig. 2, Joel Sternfeld, *Harper's Magazine* (March 1980), p. 70 <https://www.joelsternfeld.net/essays-source/2020/4/9/a-presentation-of-whales>, accessed 06.01.21.

Fig. 3, Joel Sternfeld, *Harper's Magazine* (March 1980), p. 71 <https://www.joelsternfeld.net/essays-source/2020/4/9/a-presentation-of-whales>, accessed 06.01.21.

Fig. 4, Joel Sternfeld, *Harper's Magazine* (March 1980), p. 78 <https://www.joelsternfeld.net/essays-source/2020/4/9/a-presentation-of-whales> Accessed 06.01.21.

Fig. 5, Joel Sternfeld, *Approximately 17 of 41 Sperm Whales that Beached and Subsequently Died, Florence, Oregon,* (1979), <http://portlandartmuseum.us/mwebcgi/mweb.exe?request=record;id=28873;type=101#>, accessed 06.01.21.

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